

A MAN OF HIS WORD

BY
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"THE DAUGHTER OF THE NEZ PERCÉS,"
"THE BETTER MAN," ETC.



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that his charge have not left the bedding-place for a nocturnal ramble.

However, there was one more duty to perform before I could enjoy my supper in peace: this was to ascertain that my sheep, which I had left a mile to the westward half an hour ago, were duly wending their way homewards. With the hasty stride of a hungry man I climbed to the top of the "Round Mound," a hillock of about a hundred feet in height, standing alone in the middle of the prairie, at the foot of which my camp-house was built. The origin of the Round Mound is uncertain. It was supposed by some to have been erected by Indians, in order to mark the presence of water; by others to be the mausoleum of an extinct native tribe. Be this as it may, the little hill was a most convenient camping-place, for, at its base, were two pools of water that never dried up, and on its sides the sheep bedded most contentedly; while for miles around capital pasture of all kinds could be obtained without trouble.

I was glad to see, as I reached the crest of the hill, that my sheep were little more than half a mile away, edging steadily towards me with low, mumbling baas. There were two thousand—half the “bunch” owned by myself and my partner—a like number being camped ten miles to the east, in charge of Mexican herders; the whole forming a comfortable little property of four thousand head.

I paused a moment before descending to supper, to take a bird's-eye view of the prospect. I am not, as a general rule, much affected by scenery; but I do not think I have ever stood on the Round Mound, no matter how urgent the business which I had before me might be, without lingering a few moments.

From this place I could see nearly every phase of scenery characteristic of the plains. To the north and east lay prairie, endless prairie, in long “rolls,” or undulations, brown in colour, with only a tinge of green here and there, where the summer rains had produced more lasting effect than

usual. The grass upon it was short and curly, crisp as the hair of a negro, making the most nourishing pasture in the world, for it cures on the ground, and all through the winter remains as sweet as well-matured hay.

Southward for a mile stretched similar rolling prairie-land, brought suddenly to an end by Eagle Tail Mountain, one of the foot-hills, a great table-land or mesa, with dark, rugged sides, some three hundred feet in height, covered with great square boulders of malpice rock, and forests of cedar trees and oak-scrub. There were cañons here, deep and dark, where you might sometimes find a running stream and tall pines shooting up a hundred feet. Then above cañons and forests, lo! there was another prairie, exactly similar to the one below: a prairie miles in length, which rose gradually until it broke off to give way to a great cone of rock, bare and desolate, the crater of an extinct volcano, which formed the head and centre of Eagle Tail Mountain.

So, slowly turning my head from north to east, and east to south, I reached the west, where lay the finest view of all. From north and east the darkness was hurrying up, for there is no twilight on the prairies; but the west still glowed with lurid reminiscences of the sun, and below, pure and white as an angel's wing, shone the peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Beneath, range after range, lay the foot-hills, falling into deep blue shadow, grand and wild, and of no mean height, but dwindling into utter insignificance before the sharp white ridge which towered behind, grand and unapproachable.

As I looked upon this view, vague thoughts and fancies filled my mind which I might have expressed aloud in a beautiful rhapsody had I been less hungry. I remembered in time, however, that my supper was getting cold, and refrained. But, at this moment, I saw something which made me whistle and exclaim softly to myself. Half a mile or so to the west were three horsemen approaching in the

direction of the Round Mound at a steady gallop.

Any one who has ever lived in sheep-camp will understand my excitement at the prospect of visitors. I had been 'batching' alone for two months; during this time my partner visited me, for five minutes each time, on six separate occasions, and he was the only living soul I had seen since I left the home-ranch in June. Some men have better luck; but I was on the outskirts of the settlement, with no road or track nearer than two miles, and living in a little "dug-out," scooped from the Round Mound, the whereabouts of which it was difficult to discover, except when the sheep were singing their evening hymn.

Taking all this into consideration, together with the fact that this was my first experience of camp-life, the most unsympathetic reader will understand the delight with which I anticipated the arrival of these strangers.

I went down the hill at a run, narrowly

escaping a broken neck among the loose stones; dived into the hut for my revolver—for Western etiquette must be observed—and then walked towards the approaching horsemen, feeling inclined to welcome them with a hearty cheer. Happily I remembered in time, though I was still young to Western manners, that their reply to such a greeting might probably be a rifle bullet, as such conduct to their minds could only mean dangerous insanity.

As my visitors came clearly into view, my joyous expectations began to change to extreme curiosity. They wore no hats, and no boots; their ponies had no saddles, and their reins were but rough halters of rope. Before they reached me they slackened speed, and dropped into single file. I noticed, now, that their heads were bent wearily forward, and that there were streaks of blood on the bare feet of the foremost. Before I could see more he briefly accosted me.

"How far d'you reckon we are from Stockton?"

"Ten miles."

He gave a suppressed sigh, and turned to his companions.

"I guessed it was about that, boys. Considerable pull, you see, yet—worse luck!"

They nodded in silent assent, and looked earnestly behind them. The one who had spoken, however, had his eyes fixed with some intentness upon me, and I expected him to ask for supper and a night's lodging. To my surprise he turned away, with a curt, "We must keep moving, boys. Bueno noche, stranger!"

A cold wave of disappointment passed over my soul.

"But won't you camp with me to-night?"

The man had turned his horse's head, and was about to urge him forward. He paused at my words, and stared at me harder than before, his companions now following his example. Was there any

thing wonderful in my simple offer of hospitality ?

“ I’ve not much to offer you,” I went on hastily. “ Nothing but bacon and beans to eat, and a blanket apiece to lie on. But you’re heartily welcome to it, and perhaps even rough fare is better than ten miles on bare-back ponies. What do you say ? ”

There was no reply at first. The men looking at me with what I felt was unmitigated astonishment, though it was hard to account for, as all Western men are hospitable in camp. At last the man who had spoken first said slowly to the others :

“ Seems to me, boys, that this offer is meant to be straight and square, and as things will be healthy for two hours at least, I shall get down and risk it.”

And get down he did, without a word to me, his friends following his example. The action was satisfactory ; but I was a trifle disappointed, for, though I had not offered my hospitality with the object of being thanked, and the men appeared to

belong to a low type of cowboy, of whom much in the way of politeness is not to be expected, still a word of acknowledgment would have done no harm. My thoughts travelled in this direction a very little way, however, for I had not gone more than a dozen steps towards my cabin, whither I proceeded to lead my visitors, before a voice at my elbow said quietly :

“Some years ago, I read a story about a cuss called the Good Samaritan which ~~pleased~~^{was} me very much. I didn't know that there were any living now. I guess I was wrong.”

I laughed, and looked up.

“Thanks; have you fallen among thieves, then?”

“Indians—a derved sight worse than thieves.”

This was interesting, but somewhat incredible.

“I thought Indians were peaceable folk enough now.”

“Then you've not left the Old Country long.”

There was a twinkle in his eyes as he spoke, though every step cost his bleeding feet a painful effort.

"I don't go by my own experience," I replied shortly, "though I've been out nine months. This was what my partner, who has been here some years, told me."

"I see. Ay, ranche-folk do take that line, sometimes. We—el, sir, I guess you'll be able to open his eyes, before to-morrow morning."

We had now reached camp. I entered first, and unrolled my blankets.

"Sit down, gentlemen, I'll picket your ponies out. Here's a panful of bacon, and some coffee, which you can have for a start; when I come back I'll cook some more."

My visitors nodded in reply, and promptly threw themselves upon my bed. When I returned, however, I found all three busy cooking, under the direction of the one who had constituted himself spokesman, and who, as he was invariably addressed by the others as boss, was evidently a person of some authority.

As I came in, he pointed to my pan, which was untouched.

"We're waiting for you to clean that out, Colonel. We didn't reckon to eat your supper, as well as run through your camp. Come, set to, and then we'll begin."

I was touched at this, a consideration rarely seen in a hungry traveller with as rough an aspect as my friend; though I refused, of course, to take advantage of it. A little later, when we were all sitting round a smoking pile of crisp, sweet beans, and making play with knife and spoon, as only hungry stockmen can, I looked at this fellow carefully, feeling the more freedom to do so, as he rarely raised his eyes above his plate, and seemed entirely engrossed with satisfying the cravings of nature.

He was a man of about thirty-six years of age, five feet ten inches in height, though looking taller by reason of an erect carriage, and a very well-proportioned figure. His clothes, now torn and dis-

coloured, appeared to have been of good stuff originally : a blue flannel shirt, ornamented with beads, delicately worked into the stuff, and well-fitting trousers of the best buckskin.

He had a large head, and a square, strong face, half covered by a black beard and heavy moustachè. The chin, so far as one could judge from the beard which concealed it, seemed very massive ; the mouth somewhat wide, containing rows of white teeth. Later on, when I knew my man better, I found that in times of excitement, these white teeth gleamed fiercely through the mass of hair, though, as a rule, his lips were tightly compressed.

It was a terrible mouth and jaw, and the hollow cheeks above—for the face was very thin—heightened the effect. It was the mouth of one, whose first instinct from infancy must have been combativeness, which had received encouragement and stimulus—I write from after knowledge—as he journeyed through life, until it had become a second nature.

Yet, when I glanced at his eyes and forehead, I forgot, for a moment, the impression which the lower part of the face had given me. The forehead was broad and square, though the black hair above grew low ; and the eyes, set somewhat far apart, and deeply in their sockets, were of a peculiar grey colour—large, clear and keen. The brows were black, and when the teeth below shone white—I am still writing from after knowledge—became a straight even line above the nose, and, at such times, the eyes glowed like lights burning in some dark cavern. A strange face, full of queer contrasts. A face most men would fear and distrust ; for the grey eyes, never at rest, wore a watchful expression such as one sees in a beast of prey. Yet, it must have been exceedingly handsome, before it became so hard, for the features were regular, and the complexion a clear healthy brown.

We finished our suppers, and I retired to the spring to wash the things ; the men came also and bathed their feet. Not a

word had been spoken yet by my visitors as to the cause of their miserable condition, except the allusion of the black-haired man to Indians ; but Western manners strictly forbade inquiry on my part, and hunger and weariness prevented communicativeness on theirs. I knew, however, that after supper I should hear what had befallen them ; and, sure enough, when we had concluded our business at the water, and I had provided pipes and tobacco all round, my curiosity was quickly satisfied.

“ I suppose our present fix gave you an idea that we’d been deserting from the nearest fort ? ” began the black-haired man abruptly, as he balanced himself on my three-legged stool—the only piece of furniture in the place.

“ I shouldn’t have blamed you,” he went on without waiting for a reply ; “ we looked mean enough. However, it’s not so. We’ve been corralled by Apaches ; and only by rare luck we three parted company without losing our scalps. There was another man ; but he—he was unlucky.”

He paused here for a moment to re-light his pipe, which refused to draw, and had to be laid aside until he had finished his narrative.

“It’s not often that Indians get hold of white men in broad daylight ; but we’d been on the lope for ten hours before we struck the ford at Grant’s old place, ten miles down the Chicareeka River, and, though it was only noon, we felt just about dead beat ; so instead of snoozing gently, when the horses were watered, we slept like so many calves. When we awoke we found ourselves corralled. Fifty red devils in war-paint were smiling at us, and half a dozen were busy with a nice, warm fire.”

The speaker’s eyes dilated, and he bent forward to lay a hand upon my knee.

“Young man, you are fresh from the East, and I dessay you have often heard talk by the mile about the ‘ poor Indians.’ When you go back again, just get into the pulpit somewhere and tell those pitiful folk what Indians in this country do. Here were we—four of us,—not one of us so much as

shot an Indian in our lives, except in fair fight—stripped as you see, tied up with raw hide (look at my feet), and after waiting a few minutes while the fire burnt up, compelled to sit by and watch another man hung by the arms to a bough of a tree over a slow fire of red-hot cinders. Then—yes, then—the fun began. Good God, the devilment there is in the red man!”

The narrator paused to pass his hand across his eyes, and I heard him murmur softly to himself, “Poor Tom!” He then continued in the curt tone in which he began.

“Yes; I’ve fought the Comanche down South, and rubbed against Sioux and Cheyenne in the North, but this is the first time I’ve seen the Apache. I believe he’s the worst of the crowd, though it’s hard to tell. I guess these cusses, however, hadn’t been on the war-path long, and lost their heads a bit; anyhow, they got so excited with Tom—the man over the fire—that we were forgotten, and when I managed to slip a hand loose and cut the

raw hide with a knife I had in a back pocket, we crept to our horses unnoticed, and they did not smell us out until we were well on the track. That's our day's work."

The man stopped speaking with a cough that showed his story was told, and again bent over the fire to manipulate the refractory pipe.

I was now feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. The adventure had been described very simply, yet in a way that made it seem very vivid and real. After a minute's thought, while the other two visitors puffed in silence, calm and stolid, and the one who had spoken devoted his attention energetically to my corn-cob pipe, I began to ask questions :

"And this occurred only ten miles off?"

"Yes."

"Then, perhaps I may expect a visit from these gentry myself?"

"It is very possible."

I whistled.

"Will they follow you?"

"They may."

"And if they strike my camp, must I expect the same treatment as your friend?"

"Perhaps; but it's uncertain. You're a sheepman. Tom was a cowboy. Indians hate cowboys. If they come upon you at all, it will be in a night raid, probably; but there's nothing sure. They may be thirty miles away now. They may be following here. This is a well-guarded settlement, and as soon as we get to town the red devils will have to skip about more'n enough; and so they may keep quiet, except where a horse can be stolen without much trouble."

By this time the pipe was cleaned and in full blast, and the smoker subsided into a placid silence. I was left to my own thoughts, which were not of the most cheerful nature. Presently the other men gaped and stretched themselves.

"Boys, you'd better nap it for a couple of hours," said the one with the corn-cob pipe. "The moon won't rise before midnight."

"A pious idea, boss. But who'll keep watch? We don't want to be lit on again."

"I have my pipe to finish, and will manage it with this man. You turn in."

They did so, promptly. I watched them curiously, as each rolled himself in a blanket; and then I glanced at my friend by the fire. There was a vast difference between his bearing and theirs, though neither of the others were ordinary-looking men. One was a big fellow, with red hair and a large nose, that had been broken at some time or other, and still had a ghastly white scar across the bridge. His complexion was of the ruddiest, his lips full, and his eyes small and set close together; he was, therefore, not pleasant to look upon. But there was a rude strength about his big, bullet head and broad shoulders. He would be an unpleasant enemy. The third man was much younger than his companions. He was very good looking; with light brown hair, which he wore long, and a curling, silky moustache. Yet there was a sinister look in his handsome

blue eyes, a set and twist of the lips, as he sat silently by and helped himself to what he required, that sadly spoilt his beauty. I had not the remotest notion of what he was at that time, but I found his face haunting me, and at this présent moment, eight years afterwards, it does so still. I have never seen another like it; I hope I never may.

That evening, however, I thought little about the matter, for the man on the three-legged stool was looking at me with a quiet, contemplative gaze, which seemed to go directly down to the very centre of my being, and come out finally somewhere about the small of my back. Yet I liked it. It neither frightened me, nor made me distrustful. I was altogether predisposed in favour of this man.

First, you see, I appreciated immensely his way of acknowledging the small hospitality I had shown him. Next, I was much impressed by his courtesy in insisting that I should reserve my supper for my own consumption, for it was easy

to see that this action on his part was not approved of by his companions. Moreover, I had enjoyed a good supper myself, and had heard just enough about the danger of an Indian attack, to make me feel socially inclined towards any one.

It was not long, therefore, before we were talking freely together. We drew nearer to the fire and heaped on wood; filled and emptied our pipes several times, and talked on and on, neither becoming drowsy, nor anxious for repose.

I have given, as clearly and explicitly as I can, my reasons for liking this grim stranger with the restless, watchful eyes. But there are always things which a man does that he cannot explain, and what followed after we drew close together in those two hours before midnight I can give no satisfactory reason for. I can only state the bare fact that, while the other men slept, I sat before the red embers of my camp-fire, and gave my companion pretty well all the particulars of my past life,

including some which few of my most intimate friends in England were aware of, not forgetting hopes and plans for the future. And he listened intently, only putting in a curt remark at intervals, generally in the form of a question, yet with every word showing a quiet, direct interest in the subject that drew me on, almost in spite of myself.

Just before midnight, a curious thing happened. I had paused in the full flood of my narrative to scrape the fire together, and my companion was slowly filling his pipe.

"So your partner is an Englishman?" he said. "Which part of the Old Country does he come from?"

"London; his sisters live there now."

"And how many has he?"

"Two."

"Of whom this young lady who is coming out to you, is one, I presume?"

"Yes."

"I see." He was now hunting for a suitable cinder wherewith to rekindle his

pipe. He found one, raised his head, and between the puffs said slowly :

“You have not told me her name yet. Do you mind doing so?”

I smiled. We had been engaged two years, and were to be married in three months. Yes, I would tell him her name.

“Laura Temple.”

He started ; the burning wood dropped from his hand, and fell upon his knee ; then he sat perfectly still, looking at me with rigid jaws and wide-open eyes. My astonishment may be conceived.

“Good Lord!” I exclaimed, “do you know her?”

He took his pipe out of his mouth before answering, and I saw that he had nearly bitten the cane through. A colder voice, however, was never heard, as he replied :

“I know London well. I am an Englishman myself, by birth. Some years ago I came across a family of that name. It is not uncommon. Is this Jack Temple, of Eagle Tail Ranche, your partner?”

"Certainly. You are acquainted with him?"

"By name. Where are you going to locate?"

"Near Smythe's old place on the El Gato Creek. The house is more than half built already; I have six Mexicans at work upon it now."

"It is to be of adobe, then. Nothing better in this country, though expensive to begin with."

Before I could reply, he bent over the nearest sleeper and touched his arm. The man sat up at once.

"Time to move, Pete. The moon's rising. Wake Kit."

A light tap on the shoulder did this, and my visitors prepared to depart. Those who had been sleeping stretched themselves, yawned, and made their way to the horses outside, with a simple "adios." The third man waited until they had gone, then gripped my hand with a pressure that made me realise what it must have been like to be held by a gauntlet of steel.

"I spoke about the Good Samaritan a few hours ago," he said heartily. "That was a poor way of putting the thing, for you've given me something better than charity. We shall meet again, I dare say, one of these days, and I shan't forget that I have a debt to pay. Adios."

He went outside, and I was about to follow, when he turned abruptly, and stepping back into the cabin, shut the door behind him.

"I forgot one thing," he said fixing my eye in his queer intent way, his head thrown a little back as if he were criticising a picture, and his right hand holding my arm just below the elbow. "I told you that, if the Apaches came at all, it would be at night. You may have trouble, so keep a spry look-out when the moon's bright. And, above all, mind this"—here the grip of the fingers on my arm tightened painfully—"if you get fast asleep some time, and only wake to hear the second whoop, and see a red devil coming at you through that door, don't

stop to handle a pistol. I see you carry a knife; use *that*, first on the Apache, and then upon yourself. It'll come to the same thing in the end, and will save you a bad three hours. Remember poor Tom!"

He was off, and the three men galloped away at a pace somewhat different from that at which they arrived. I leant against my door-post, and meditated. How much of this talk about Indians was bunkum? What a start that fellow gave when Laura's name was mentioned! I must describe him carefully to her. Why, I had never even found out his name! I bit my lip, and changed my position uneasily. Here was a fine state of things. I, Harry Thornton, twenty-four years old, of sound mind, had allowed a stranger to worm out of me all my family news, without receiving one iota of information in return, except his adventures since the hour of noon. I groaned. What a madly idiotic thing to do! For all I knew, my story, with picturesque additions,

might be spread half over the settlement in the next fortnight. A pretty business! However, it was done, and I must hope for the best. At any rate, as I was very tired, and it was past midnight, the thing to be done now was to go to sleep. This I did, in rather less than five minutes, all recollection of the cheering and suggestive advice of my dark-haired visitor having passed out of my mind.

It must have been, as far as I can calculate, about an hour later—not more—that I woke from a confused jumble of dreams with a start, as if I had received an electric shock. I lay still for a moment, with my eyes shut, a dull, oppressive sense somewhere about me that something had happened, or was about to happen, which I ought to be doing something to prevent; what—I could not tell. As my ideas became clearer, this oppression of spirits gradually changed to vague terror, and a cold perspiration broke over me. Yet still I knew not what could be the cause. A few seconds passed; then, like

a burning coal dropped upon my forehead, came remembrance of the stranger's warning.

The Indians ! And I was alone—quite alone !

Yet I might be wrong. I had heard no sound. It was fancy ; it was nightmare. No ! Faintly from the west, but distinct and unmistakable, came a long-drawn, plaintive wail, the howl of a prairie-wolf—the cry of the Indian scout. True, it was a long way off, but what of that ? I could not run away. The only point was, whether it might not be a genuine wolf. But this would soon be ascertained, for I had picked up enough prairie-lore to know that, if this cry were an Indian's, it would soon be answered from an exactly opposite direction. With my heart in my mouth, I lay and listened. Five, ten, fifteen seconds passed. No sound. My breath came more easily ; my pulse slackened its feverish speed. I even winked twice, thinking that I might really be more than half asleep ; and I was just about to rise

and shake myself. When—"Cruk—Cruk, Cru—uk."

The coyote's short bark, with its concluding howl, struck upon my ear like the knell of fate.

It came in an exactly opposite direction from the first. I sighed, and tried to move my right hand. My knife lay a few inches from it, yet I was so much overcome by this rigid, involuntary horror, that I had not strength enough to grasp it. I cannot say how long I remained like this; it seemed to be many hours, though in reality it could only have been a few minutes. I thought I could feel fingers moving on my hair, and hear soft breathing at my bedside. I knew the Indians were about me, and longed to get up and strike, if it were only one good blow; yet, as if held by hands of iron, I could move neither hand nor foot. At last my senses brought me one distinct impression: the crushing of grass, the soft, regular tread of approaching feet. As this sound became more distinct, I ceased to feel the fingers

in my hair. My circulation began to bestir itself with every breath I drew ; the life-blood coursed through my veins. My right hand was free, and I grasped my knife ; the left hand became less numb, and the fingers curled joyfully round the hilt of my revolver. As I touched the familiar weapon, the deadly sensation of helplessness passed away altogether. I bounded to my feet and listened. Swish, swish ; the step was outside the cabin now. There was a moment's pause, and then a figure appeared in the doorway. Raising my knife, I sprang forwards with a yell.

"Steady there," said a quiet voice. "I am not an Apache."

It was my visitor with the black beard. I am not very clear as to what happened then. A man whose nerves had been shaken as much as mine during the past few minutes, is rather apt to lose his head when the scare is over. I have a shrewd idea that I fainted ; for I can remember dropping my pistol, and feeling the cabin

twisting and whirling about me, and then coming to myself upon my back, with some one holding a wet rag to my temples. Thoroughly ashamed to be caught in such a predicament, I tried to sit up and laugh.

"This is foolish work. I suppose my supper did not agree with me. I certainly thought my place was full of Indians, and that you had come to report progress about the slow fire."

My companion did not respond to this feeble attempt.

"Are you better?" he said briefly.

"Quite steady, now, thanks; how ridiculous!"

"Wait a moment; let me feel your pulse. Ay, you seem to have worked round. I'll tell you my news now, for there's no time to be lost. Have you heard anything during the past few minutes?"

"I heard your step——"

"Nothing else?"

"A coyote howl or two."

"Oh, did you hear that? You know what it means, I s'pose?"

I looked intently into his face, upon which the moon shone brightly through the open doorway. Was he joking? He did not look like it.

"The Apache scout passing the word?"

"You're right." Then sharply: "Are you scared?"

"Not a bit."

I spoke the truth. I was no longer alone. He looked at me steadily, his head on one side, as it had been when he said "good-bye."

"We-el, my friend, then I must inform you that about an hour hence, if we stay here, this dug-out will be blazing sky-high, and we—we shall be simmering gently. Therefore, you must pack up what you can carry, mount behind me on Leone there, and strike slick for the settlements. D'you see?"

I started. Until this moment I had not fully realised that he was serious.

"D'you see?" he repeated,

"Ye-es. But—but what will become of my sheep?"

Now that I was fully awake, things began to assume a new aspect altogether. If my property were confiscated, my life would not be worth much to me.

"H'm," he answered, dubiously. "Indians are not very partial to mutton if they can get beef; but I daresay they'll have a bit of a feed."

"And about the rest? For they can't eat two thousand."

"The rest? We—el, I fear they'll go off on the dead jump. Either towards the river or the mesa; both, most likely; dividing into two or three bunches. No, it'll be rather a bad business for them, but it can't be helped. Are you ready?"

I thought over the thing for a moment, and then made up my mind.

"No, thanks."

"What's in the way? The pony won't kick us off."

"That's not it. I shall not leave my sheep to Apaches."

“But what good——”

“Wait. You would say that if I’m strung up, it won’t help the stock much. No. But not long ago, you said a sheep-man was not in so much danger as a cowboy. There’s a chance that they might let me off. Then I thought of driving the sheep towards the home-ranche, so that if I were seized, the stock, with their heads in the right direction, might get home in safety. I’ll chance it, thank you. You clear back to town.”

I was off the bed now ; all weakness gone. I had never felt better in my life.

My companion made no reply, but silently watched me as I opened a fire-proof cash-box under my pillow, and drew from it a packet of letters—the last Laura had written—and buckled on my revolver and knife.

We went outside together. How quiet and peaceful everything was ! The air delightfully cool and sweet ; the sky cloudless ; and above our heads the moon,

sailing clear and bright. There was little time to think of these things, however, for I glanced quickly at the sheep, and uttered an exclamation. They had arisen from their bedding-ground, as they will sometimes on a moonlight night, and were steadily trailing off in long lines—towards the home-ranche.

I turned my face the other way, and noticed that a fresh breeze was springing up from the west. Bright moonlight, and a strong wind in our favour; nothing could be better. I now thought of the man who had ridden back, at much risk, to warn me.

“Good-bye, sir. Don’t think me ungrateful. But I cannot desert my sheep. They are all I have.”

He was mounted by this time; but to my surprise refused my proffered hand.

“I see,” he replied gruffly. “And now we’ll drop conversation. It’ll be the safest plan. Maybe they will think this is merely a wandering flock, if they should hear the bells.”

"But you are not coming with me?"

He grunted and turned his horse, saying, as he paced off to stir up some laggards on the hill:

"Good gosh, what sort of a hair-pin do you take me to be, in the devil's name? You see to the left side of the flock, and I'll keep up the right. *Vamos*, now."

He loped away, and we were presently in motion, the camp fading quickly away behind us, in the grey, ghostly haze.

On and on—not a word, not a look—each walking at a steady pace, urging the laggards gently, and carefully guiding the foremost by the winding creek which ran beside Eagle Tail Rancho, five miles away. On and on, until I could scarcely remember when the drive first began, and hardly expected it ever to end; for, the first excitement being over, a great reaction of drowsy listlessness had set in. Thanks, however, to the bright moonlight and fresh wind, the sheep went on without stop or stay, now and then giving a gentle baa, but mostly in silence, only the soft

rumble of their many feet breaking the stillness of the night. Suddenly I saw the vague outline of my companion's figure remain motionless; then he wheeled towards me, and galloped up.

"Look," he said laconically, pointing to the west. Far, far behind us a red wavering light was creeping up, now rising, now falling, again rising, until it became a steady glare. It was my camp-house burning. The Indians were there.

We watched it silently for a while. Then my friend observed meditatively :

"The fun is over for to-night. Our scalps are safe. I'm glad we didn't leave the sheep."

"How far off are we?" I had lost all sense of distance.

"Four miles, good. See, the sheep have got wind of home now. Hear that baa? Those wethers at the head are making for the water below your partner's ranche. I must go."

"But you will come in with me?" I said quickly. "I insist upon it; you

can't refuse if you've any decent feeling in you."

But he only smiled, and shook his head.

"No, sir, not to-night. Your partner will be quite awakened up enough by you and your story, without seeing me. Adios. I have not paid my debt yet, I know. But I will one of these days. Adios!"

And away he rode without another word. I looked helplessly after him. Who was he? What was he? Why had I not asked his name? Well, it was too late to wish. I must follow my sheep, and retail the news of the day to Jack. I should think he would be somewhat astonished for once in his life.

CHAPTER II

THE SECOND MEETING

I WAS much mistaken when I imagined that the simple unvarnished tale I had to tell would disturb the equanimity of my partner, Jack Temple. He growled at being roused up so early in the morning, it was true ; but took no interest whatever in the identity of the queer stranger, and when I described the misadventures of my visitor and the burning of the cabin, he only shrugged his shoulders, with a twinkle in his eye.

“ Ah—ha, Harry ; so you’ve brushed against the reds at last, and had your first taste of the bitters of Western life. I’m glad you came out of it with your hair on ; but you ran a tidy risk, by sticking to those sheep. Eh ? I told you that

Apaches were a mild race, did I? Well, so they are, four years out of five. And now that I think of it, exactly five years ago Heman's ranche, over the hill here, was burnt; and half a dozen of us sat in this place expecting that our turn would come before morning. But it didn't. It's a terrible nuisance having the flock bundling home at this time of year. However, things will be quiet enough in a week, and then we'll rebuild the dug-out and put José in it. I've thought of making a small corral for the fine-grade rams, which are due in October, so you will have plenty of work for the next month. Then there'll be dipping and carting the furniture from Trinidad to your place, and after that—don't stand grinning there, you ape! Go and cut some firewood. There's many a slip—and she's not out yet!"

The next four weeks passed quickly enough. I was working "to time." There were three hundred cedar posts, six feet six inches in length, to be carted

from the mesa, two miles away, where they had been cut by a Mexican by contract, at the rate of five cents per post. Then three trenches had to be dug, two feet in depth, the width of the spade, and fifty feet in length. In these the posts were placed side by side, and the earth around them "tamped" down to give firmness and stability; and, lastly, a waggon-load of long saplings had to be cut from the banks of the Chicareeka River, a mile to the west of the Round Mound, and bound horizontally across the outer side of the wall of cedar.

One afternoon, in the fourth week after I left camp, I heard a halloo from the house. Jack was on the porch, his arms buried in a huge wash-tub, where some flannel shirts were undergoing a process of rough-and-ready scrubbing that spoke well for the stoutness of their material.

"Oh! say! Harry, have you seen the horses anywhere round? I guess they're off on the bust, as they've been running for a week. I want to go to Trinidad to-

morrow. Only remembered it this morning."

He paused to wring out his shirt. The drift of his remarks was obvious.

"Shall I bring them in for you, and finish the corral to-morrow?"

"Yes. Hurry up. You won't have more than a clear hour before sundown, and the deuce only knows where you'll find the brutes. Keep to the mesa."

In ten minutes I was in the saddle, briskly loping toward Eagle Tail Mountain, only too glad to vary my employment.

Hunting horses on the prairie, however, is like many other occupations in this world, a pleasant pastime to begin with, but, if not speedily attended with success, soon becoming a wearisome and disappointing task. I went first of all to the usual haunts of the ponies, but could find no sign of their presence. Then I worked westward, winding in and out of the foot of the mountain, scanning the rocks above, and the prairie below, and wondering, as I went on, whether it were possible for the

perverse brutes to have climbed the mesa, and be feeding on the table-land ; in which case there would be a hunt before me of tall dimensions. The wind blew cold and fresh, and reminded me that in my haste to be off I had forgotten my coat, and that an evening ride should not be undertaken in shirt and canvas trousers only. There was no help for it though ; these ponies must be found before dark. I pushed on faster, much to the disgust of my horse, a cow-pony (that is, a pony trained to handle wild cattle), of mature age and experience, who, though he could stretch his long limbs when he pleased at a speed which many a colt might envy, was much adverse to going far from the stable at this time of day. His anxiety to return to hay and meditations was expressed by a passive edging round in the direction of the ranche, whenever he thought I was off my guard.

We were now about seven miles from home. To the north I could see my old camp, and the wind wafted a faint baa

towards me, showing that José was already busy with his supper. This sight and sound reminded me of my last night at camp. It seemed far more than four weeks ago. I had ridden to Stockton several times since, and eagerly scanned the loafers about the saloon and the travelers busy with dinner in the restaurant below, hoping that I might chance to meet my friend again. But I had not found him, and, remembering the wandering propensities of the cowboy community, I doubted much if I should do so this summer.

I turned sharply to the left. The ground fell away rather steeply here, for nearly parallel with this side of the mesa ran the Chicareeka River, a narrow silver streak with high banks ; in spring a turbid torrent, with the weight of the melted mountain snow upon it, and a place to be carefully avoided by the herder with a thirsty flock under his care.

The space between river and mesa became narrower and narrower, until it was

a mere bridle-path. The sun had sunk to rest ten minutes ago, and my chances of finding these rambling horses before night began to look rather small. The prospect was not a pleasant one, for I could hardly go home without them, and the prairie is cold at night. On my left towered the mesa, gloomy and dark; on the right lay the river, a belt of green; beyond, the prairie, skirted by foot-hills, the snowy ridge of peaks looming in the dim distance. I was getting tired and cross, and relaxed my hold of the reins to change my seat. Instantly Comanche turned his head to wheel on a homeward track. But, just as I was about to put him straight with somewhat unnecessary vigour, the old horse came round himself, and, to my great astonishment, began to step briskly forward, pricking up his ears and raising his crest as he advanced. I let him go his own pace, and waited patiently for the explanation of these proceedings.

Had we come upon the ponies at last? This was apparently the case, for Comanche

neighed loudly at the moment, his call being answered from what seemed the depths of the mountain. No spur was needed now. With a long, swinging stride the old horse swept down the winding path, and brought himself to with a promptness rather inconvenient to his rider before a narrow opening between two rugged cones of rock. A twitch of the bridle and touch of the heel sent him through it with great quickness, and, after following a narrow track for twenty yards or so, I found myself at the entrance of a spacious cañon.

I now saw the reason for Comanche's excitement. At the further end of a large semi-circle of thickly-growing grass were some twenty horses ; two or three picketed out, the rest loose, all feeding for dear life on the fresh, green pasture. Nearer to me a huge camp-fire was blazing, round which were lounging a dozen men, and at the head of the cañon, where a narrow stream of water trickled among the rocks, was another man, kneeling and busily scraping

the bottom of a large frying-pan with gravel.

Upon my appearance the loafers at the fire turned their heads, and two or three sat up and stared at me ; but none made a move in my direction except the man with the pan. He promptly desisted from his labours and came towards me with a steady stride.

It was now dusk ; but before the camp-master had advanced within speaking distance, I recognised my old acquaintance with the restless eyes. I greeted him warmly, and was answered in a quiet, composed tone ; but the grip he gave my hand, and his gleaming smile, were more expressive than a flow of words.

“ Out late ! ”

“ Yes ; I’m hunting horses. I suppose you have not seen two mares in this locality ? ”

“ A bay and a black, branded with a T on the near fore shoulder ? ”

“ The identical team. Where are they ? ”

"In my bunch here. They joined it an hour ago."

"How very lucky! Will you give me a hand to cut them out? I'm learning to ride by degrees, but am not perfect yet, my business being sheep-raising; and among these rocks, at this hour, the job will be an awkward one."

"Won't you camp here to-night then, and cut 'em out in the morning? Your partner will know that you can take care of yourself."

While he was speaking I sniffed a delightful odour of broiled steak. It was an offer not to be refused.

"Thanks, I will."

"I should say, by-the-by," he said hastily, "that we're rough here. Do you mind that?"

This was amusing. What did he take me for?

"I hope not. It is true that I've not been quite a year out; but for all that I'm a Western stockman, and not afraid of Western company."

He nodded, and without further remark led the way to a large rock, where lay blankets and a saddle.

“Put your gear here, with mine. We’ll sleep together. Turn the pony loose; he’ll run with the rest; then come to supper.”

I did as I was bid, and presently made my way to the fire, and stretched myself at ease, while my friend, with the assistance of two others—whom I recognised to be the men I had housed at sheep-camp, and who nodded slightly in reply to my greeting—prepared the meal.

It was a good one. Juicy beef-steak, eaten with Mexican cakes, made of dough and a pinch of soda, kneaded and pressed out to wafer-like thinness by the fingers, placed in the pan on bubbling melted bacon-fat, and fried to a delicate crispness—all washed down by coffee which a fastidious Frenchman would have found no fault with. After this, pipes and conversation.

The talk was at first confined to the

other men, the camp-master and myself puffing in silence ; and it was not long before I began to realise vividly the significance of my friend's allusion to rough company.

I had been accustomed to hear subjects freely discussed round a camp-fire that should be left alone ; but there was a keen and brutal relish of sickening and disgusting details to-night, which made my face burn to the tips of my ears.

I was pleased to see that my friend took no part in the talk ; and I turned eagerly to him as he removed his pipe to ask a question in a pause of the conversation :

“ Been in town lately ? ”

“ Last week.”

“ Any news ? ”

“ Yes, they say Dempster's got all his horses back but one. Poor beggar ! He's had a hard time of it. Twenty ponies taken in one night, and one a mare worth five hundred dollars. He had to go as far as Albuquerque before he could get her.”

My companion nodded ; then leaned back comfortably against a little hillock behind him, again removed his pipe from his lips, and observed :

“ Yes, I heard that old Dempster found his stable empty one morning. Kind of served the old cuss right, didn't it ? ”

I sat bolt upright, and put my pipe away. It was a subject upon which I held a very strong opinion, and which I now proceeded to ventilate, my eyes fixed upon the burning log at my feet.

“ Served him right, you say ? Well, I've heard that remark before, and I must confess I cannot see the justice of it a bit. Take for granted that he's a mean, grasping, hard-hearted curmudgeon ; and that if he'd had a grain of right feeling in him he would have sent some one on his fast mare for a doctor the other day, when his cowboy's child fell ill ; yet you cannot prove it to be right or reasonable that a band of irresponsible men should swoop down directly afterwards, and rob him of every

horse he possessed because he did not do it."

"But if this were the only way in which he could be adequately punished? Old Dem is as hard and mean as a Government mule, and rich as he can stick. His horses are the only thing he cares about—besides, after all, you say he got 'em back."

"No thanks to those who stole them, though. See what he paid, and then, remember what happened to Jake Blundell, the County Sheriff, when he came up to the horse-stealers with his posse."

There was a movement behind me. The conversation among the men had ceased. They were apparently about to turn in. Some had risen to their feet, and were fumbling in their belts. All were silent, and every one, though that I scarcely noticed, was looking at me.

"It was the greatest farce that was ever heard of," I went on, warming to my subject—"the behaviour of that Sheriff and his posse. Thirty men, well-armed and

well-mounted, all cowed and turned from what they had solemnly sworn to do, by a dozen, and the only excuse—a fear of the leader of the gang, Mike Alison. This man faced the Sheriff, I believe, alone, with his men posted among the rocks. Fine courage! thirty afraid of one! Yet it is said that Jake Blundell was a Texan ranger in the Mexican War, and is as brave a man as ever lived. I can't understand it. Can you?"

"Wa-al, it appears somewhat out of the way, certainly," he replied slowly. "But it is true that Jake's clear grit. A better Sheriff was never appointed."

"Then why was he afraid of Mike Alison?" I said sharply. "I am astonished at hearing so much of this man, as if he were the only one in this part of the world who could shoot. There's a reward of five thousand dollars offered for him alive or dead, yet he is able by the mere power of his name and reputation to walk into a town in broad daylight, and never a word spoken, or a revolver raised! Perhaps it

is because I've not been out of England long; but that such men as he and his gang should live a week unhung, in the midst of a respectable community such as this, seems to me monstrous."

I now paused for breath, expecting my friend to reply; but, instead of his quiet voice, there came another directly behind me, harsh in tone, and hoarse with passion.

"Is that so, stranger? Then, by thunder, when your tongue slips again, be more careful who you're blattin' to!"

I sprang up, breathlessly.

The piñon log was blazing, and for fifteen yards around it was as light as day. Standing within three feet of me was a tall man, holding a cocked revolver in his right hand, and a bare knife in his left. By his long, brown hair, and handsome face, I knew him to be the youngest of my visitors at camp, Kit Blossie.

A little further away were the others, each caressing a knife or pistol, though only Kit's was presented at me. All

were eyeing me, however, with the impressive and critical interest I remembered noticing in the face of a pig-killer at a Chicago hog-factory, when his first victim was being placed into position. Of course the truth flashed across my mind instantly. The very men I had been so vigorously apostrophising were before me. I set my teeth, and tried to control myself, and do the right thing: which, without doubt, ought to have been an apology. Alas! a free tongue was not my only weakness; and there was something so rasping, and contemptuous about the tone of Kit Blossie, that, despite my consciousness of being in fault, and notwithstanding the fact that my life hung by the slenderest thread that a life may, my temper rose to boiling point, and no apology would come; only hot, hasty words.

“I expressed the opinion for which I was asked. I did not know what your profession was. You may go to the devil!”

There was a general laugh at this—a low, quiet laugh. The muscles of the grim

faces—looking darker and more sinister than even nature had intended, lit up as they were by the flickering fire-light—never relaxed a hair's-breadth. The sound which came from them was dry, and more significant than oaths.

The man in front of me seemed to grow taller, as, with a smart click, he brought his revolver to the ready, pointing the muzzle at my feet.

"So!" he said, sneering. "Then we must let go, I s'pose. Wait till I count ten, boys. If he's on his knees before, and ready to repeat the words I'll put into his mouth, p'raps we'll forgive his blasted impertinence. If not——" he concluded his sentence with a grim chuckle. There was an approving murmur from the others. Then Kit began to count, raising his pistol inch by inch.

"*One.*"

I shifted my position slightly. Kit stepped quickly forward, and stood directly over me.

"*Two.*"

My breath came quick and short. I withdrew my eyes from him, with an effort, and looked round. Every man but one was holding a revolver after the manner of Kit Blossie, and as "*Three*" was pronounced, raised the muzzle of his weapon some six inches. The only one passive in the matter was the man who had befriended me at camp. His face was turned away, and he appeared to be perfectly unconscious that anything unusual was going on. I felt a keen pang of disappointment. True, he was but one among thirteen, and if he should take my part, might share my fate. Nevertheless, when I remembered his parting words a month ago, it was hard to be deserted in time of need.

"*Four.*"

I turned again, and faced the man who spoke. The first sensation of helpless rage was wearing off. My nerves hardened, and my pulse grew steady before the sharp, cold edge of imminent danger. What should I do?

"Five, Six, Seven."

He was counting faster ; the revolver rising higher and higher, pointing now just below my breast.

Should I submit ? It was a revolting thing to do ; besides, it would be of little use, if the stories I had heard of the refined and relentless cruelty of the horse-stealers were true.

"Eight."

Yet I could not stand still, and be butchered like a calf in a slaughter-house. I measured my enemy carefully, and raised myself on tip-toe. I was two inches shorter than he, but broader in the shoulders ; I remembered old college days, when I held a boxing championship for two terms ; and I drew a long, deep breath.

"Nine."

The word was spoken slowly ; and the revolver was now on a level with my chin ; but he got no further. With all my force I sprang upon him, delivering a heavy blow on the upper part of his nose.

My action was so sudden, and, I believe, so unexpected, that, though Kit pulled the trigger of his revolver, it was too late, and the bullet flew wide of its mark. It was a touch and go, for the man had a knife, which he knew well how to use, and he was big and strong; as it was, however, excitement gave a force to my blows, which proved too much for him. At the first he staggered, at the second, a right-hander on the line of the jawbone, just below the ear, he threw up his arms, and measured his length on the grass.

Flushed with the victory, I turned to the rest; then caught my breath, for eleven pairs of eyes were glaring at me, and, below, eleven revolvers were pointed at my head.

Crack! The cañon echoed and re-echoed with the murderous clang; but I fell on my back, unhurt. Some one had gripped my ankle, as I turned from settling with Kit Blossie, and tripped me up. The bullets flew over my head.

As I lay, half-stunned by my fall, I felt

fingers round my throat, and a knee upon my chest. Then came the click of a pistol-lock.

They would not have much trouble now. I was helpless in very truth. I kept my teeth and eyes tightly closed. Why didn't they do their business?

And now I heard some one speaking just above me. It was not Kit's voice, but the quiet tone of the man whom I thought had left me to my fate.

"Boys," it said—and sweeter music a poor wretch never heard—"there's been enough of this. I like fun, but we don't want any more to-night. Did you speak, Pete Worral? Well, out with it, then!" An emphatic dissent had interrupted my friend's last words, and I heard the third of my camp-companions chime in:

"P'rap's you don't know, Boss; that Kit's about dead?—his face smashed in, any way?"

"Is that so?" was the quiet reply.
"I'm glad to hear it, very glad to hear it."

It is about time he should learn that bullying don't always pay. Have you anything more to say?"

There was no answer. After waiting a few seconds, my friend continued:

"I said, boys, that there'd been enough of this; and I meant it. This is a free country, and every one has a right to his opinion. Besides, this boy here, when Pete and Kit and myself escaped from the Apaches by the skin of our teeth the other day, took us in, gave us the best of what he had, and treated us as not another ranchman living would have done. So just remember this, all of you: If there's a man anywhere round who hankers after the shortest cut to hell, he'd better try to put a hole into Harry Thornton. I'll take care he ain't disappointed, and I generally keep my word. Now—turn in."

The grip on my throat slackened, and the knee was withdrawn from my chest. Accepting the hint, I got up. The log of pitch-pine was now a mass of red embers, but there was still light enough to dis-

tinguish the figures of the horse-stealers. The group was scattered now, two or three unrolling blankets, the rest sitting lazily before the fire, as if they had never left it. I noticed the crowd very little, however, my thoughts full of one thing only—the identity of the man who had now saved my life for the second time. He was standing near me, and at this moment passed me my hat. I pressed his hand. If I am to confess the truth, there was a lump at the back of my throat that made a considerable effort necessary before I could speak distinctly.

“Thank you,” I said; “thank you for what you’ve done to-night. I don’t know what to say about it. There’s nothing I can say, except that if I can ever do the same for you I will. But there is one thing I must know. What is your name? I told you mine.”

I was still holding his hand, but now he drew it away, and I heard him give a short, sharp sigh.

“Yes, I’ll tell you my name if you like, though you’ll wish you’d kept your hand to yourself. We can never be friends, Thornton. *I am Mike Alison.*”

CHAPTER III

HOW THE NEWS CAME TO STOCKTON

So the man to whom I had given my fullest confidence was Mike Alison himself ; one who, as the phrase goes out west, "kills a man for the pleasure of seeing him fall." This was a revelation calculated to afford material for painful reflection. Yet, perhaps, because I was tired ; perhaps on account of the sudden transition from the sudden extremity of danger to a feeling of perfect safety, I slept the whole night through. I cannot remember ever passing a better night than this when I lay on the ground side by side with Mike Alison. I dropped asleep two minutes after my head touched the pillow, and the sun was up before I opened my eyes again. I expected a little awkwardness at breakfast,

and, in fact, not much conversation was put in. I looked round for Kit Blossse, but he was not to be seen, nor was Pete Worrall. For reasons of their own they kept apart, and the other men made no allusion to last night's accident.

As the last rasher of bacon disappeared, and the men began to fill their pipes, Mike Alison called one of them.

"Tim," he said quietly, as if it were not a command, but an invitation, "get on your pony and cut out those two that we picked up last night. When you've done that, rope the bay horse with the T brand and bring him here."

In fifteen minutes my ponies were on the prairie, and at the mouth of the cañon I was holding Comanche, ready to go. Mike Alison had been as good as his word. I grasped his hand warmly in farewell; he returned the pressure, and smiled.

"Adios, young man. Well — shake hands then, if you will. Remember now what I said: here, men fight with pistols, not fists. This is not the Old Country.

When you want to let out upon some other fellow, shoot him, don't knock him down. Adios."

He turned and left me.

An hour's brisk gallop brought me to the ranche. I prefer not to repeat Jack's remarks when he heard my adventures of the previous night. There are some people who can never hear of a friend doing a foolish thing without commenting upon it in a manner which makes him feel like a bear on a hot plate. Suffice it to say that I became a bear on a hot plate. Happily for me, Jack had no time to make me dance, because he was in a hurry to get to town.

And there was a letter for me.

What did it matter if Jack laughed and chaffed, and made me feel what a hot-headed fool I had made myself when I found that letter.

Did I say, before we began to talk so much about Mike Alison, that Laura had actually left Liverpool? She had, and now she wrote me the sweetest and fondest

of letters—cruelly short—just to say that in five days she would be with me.

She wrote from New York, where she had been staying two or three days before leaving Eastern civilisation.

She was accompanied by her guardian and uncle, Mr. Geoffrey Temple. It was plucky of the old man, at sixty-five, to travel all the way from London to New Mexico, in order to see his niece married with his own eyes. But he was fond of her, which I daresay was the reason why he had made himself so confoundedly disagreeable about the engagement. Certainly he did his best to break it off and to prevent our union.

He honestly considered that I was going, with my eyes open, to doom Laura to a life of hardship, danger, and poverty, and that I ought to have left England without speaking to her again. And, of course, I could never forget that when my poor father died suddenly, and I left college with only a thousand pounds in the world, Mr. Temple did all in his power to prevent

me from seeing her, though we had been engaged a year, and my darling had told him she would never give me up. Indeed, had I not seen her eager, tearful face watching for me at the window at Temple Hall, I should have gone out West without a word, and we might never have met again.

What did all this matter? The good old man gave way when he saw that Laura's happiness depended upon it; and, besides, he never had any personal objections to me; and I am glad to bear testimony to the splendid courage of a man of his age, accustomed to a quiet English country life, who deliberately undertook, for the sake of his niece, a journey of five thousand miles, and cheerfully went through discomforts such as few quiet and orderly Englishmen ever dream of.

Oh, but there was work to do within the next four days! The ranche had to be cleaned, and scrubbed, and set to rights from top to bottom; and then there was the "dipping," an important process which

has to be performed once a year by the sheepmen of the Western territories. You will understand the trouble when I tell you that every single animal of the whole flock—in our case, five thousand in number—has to be immersed completely in hot tobacco juice.

At our ranche, this year, I do not believe we should ever have got through the business at all—for the wretched people who supplied the tobacco sent it a week later than they should have done, our tank leaked, and our furnace wouldn't burn properly—if it had not been our good fortune to secure the services of Kirk Troy. Why Kirk Troy was called by everybody Kirk Troy the Idiot, puzzled me until he had lived with us a week or more. He was a tall, handsome fellow, broad in the shoulder and lean in the flank, with a cadaverous, melancholy face, of which a pendulous under-lip, hanging loosely when he was not speaking, was the only feature to convey a suggestion that he was not quite "all there." His nose was large and

prominent, starting out suddenly from between a pair of mild brown eyes : and he was the most patient, docile, hard-working creature ever seen. Yet, though patience and docility were marked characteristics of Kirk Troy, his nature had another side.

There was a story that a few years before, Kirk being at the time alone, in sheep camp, an unfortunate Mexican stole into his cabin with intent to pilfer ; there he was found by the master in the act of cutting the throat of a troublesome puppy, which had disputed his entrance. This Mexican was never seen again. A traveller passing the camp next day saw a mound of new earth at the roadside, and asked its meaning. " Well, sir," said Kirk, " there was a funeral here this morning. I am fond of dogs ;" and he mildly asked the traveller if he would spend the night in his cabin. This man found, however, that he had urgent business elsewhere.

Apart from this anecdote, a fellow with more blameless reputation than Kirk Troy

it would have been hard to find. Yet he had a history. He was the son of a Californian farmer, who had immigrated into New Mexico, to raise sheep when Kirk was still a boy. At eighteen, he was the owner of a flock of a thousand head of Mexican ewes, and with capital prospects, being a quiet and sober fellow and already a first-rate stockman. He had three brothers, who settled down on farms of their own, one by one, leaving him, the youngest, tending his sheep alone, living the solitary camp-life most of the year, of which I had just been having an experience.

Kirk Troy was a shy and reserved man, though at that time as sane as any one. People laughed, and said they pitied any girl who should care for him, as he would never have the pluck to propose. They were mistaken. A young lady, Miss Jenny Maliber, of St. Louis, came to a neighbouring town to spend the summer. Kirk saw a good deal of her, and from the first day they met, he began to lose his nervous

shyness. She was clever, vivacious, and pretty; he, gentle in manner, handsome in face, with the physical strength of six ordinary men. That Jenny was a flirt was undeniable, but this did not prevent Kirk from loving her or his affection from being returned—for a time. By-and-by they became engaged; then she went home, and he settled down with strong hands and will to make his pile and win her. But it was never to be. A month from the time she arrived in St. Louis, Miss Jenny had nearly forgotten her frontier lover; in another month she only remembered the tie between them sufficiently to feel that it was insupportable; and she wrote asking to be set free. No one saw Kirk for months after this letter reached him—the first he had ever received in his life. Then he quietly told his friends what had happened, and asked for the subject not to be touched upon by any one. He never complained, and no one dared to say a word against her in his presence. His way of life remained unaltered; he went on

tending his sheep in camp, and appeared at intervals among his fellow men the same gentle creature he had always been. People wondered, even his own brothers, that he took it so quietly. Quietly! They did not know what was going on in that silent brain.

For seven years Kirk went his solitary way, and then it became evident to everybody that his mind was affected. He stuttered slightly in his speech; he would sit for hours, if he had nothing particular to do, crouching in a chair, staring vacantly before him, motionless, except for a ceaseless movement of the hands, now passing one over the other, now interlacing the fingers tightly, and again rubbing the palms together, round and round with a slow regular motion. The break-up of the intellect came gradually. Even when I knew him, a year after it had been first noticed, he would behave at times exactly like other people, and, as I have already stated, his power of handling sheep was unsurpassable. We, therefore, considered

ourselves fortunate to be able to engage him through the winter months as foreman herder.

With Kirk Troy's help the digging was concluded the day before I was due in Stockton. And, by this time, also, thanks to Sarah Brunt—a spinster of forty years—big and bony—who was to be Laura's housekeeper when the new place at El Gato Creek was in a fit state of habitation—Eagle Tail Ranche presented an appearance of cleanliness and comfort never before seen.

All was ready, therefore, in time; and on the fourth day after receiving Laura's letter, I rose before dawn, and groomed all the horses thoroughly, to their immense astonishment. Then I spent an hour in cleaning my best pair of plated spurs, and my new ivory-handled revolver. By ten all preparations were complete. I had donned my grey buckskin suit, and Comanche held his head high with the pride of bearing a brand-new, fifty-dollar Californian saddle. Jack stood by as I

prepared to mount, and composedly lit his matutinal pipe.

“Adios, my boy. Mind the old horse don’t buck you off. You shouldn’t have given him that extra feed of corn last night. Don’t forget to order a few hundred rounds of rifle cartridges. If your new friend, Mike Alison, pays us a visit we shall want all we can get.”

I laughed and rode away; but Jack was more in earnest than he appeared to be. He had never been really comfortable in his mind since my acquaintance with Mike began.

“Of all the foolish things you ever did, Harry,” he said, emphatically, “shaking hands with that cuss was the worst. You never know what such a man as he mayn’t do, or try to do.”

This morning Jack’s allusion to Mike made very little impression upon me indeed. My thoughts were dwelling on other things. After one brisk spurt I travelled gently. The coach could not arrive before two at the earliest; and I did not wish to be

obliged to loaf about town for a couple of hours.

A Western pony has only two paces : when his rider is on particular business, such as hunting cattle or horses, he strikes out at the lope, or canter, quickening to a gallop when the animals are in view ; at other times he ambles, but he never trots. The reason for this is that Western men ride with long stirrups, and never rise from the saddle by so much as an inch, no matter what their horses are about.

My journey this day was at the "pace." I made my way leisurely northward, along the apology for a road, which only deserved its name in this dry weather, being nothing more than two narrow tracks where the grass had been worn away by the passage of heavy waggons. I glanced at old familiar landmarks as I passed them with a quiet smile. It was the last time I should pass them alone. I reached the little wooden bridge which spanned the Chicareeka, the same river which, a few miles further down, curved to the south

and met the Eagle Tail mesa. I examined this structure critically, noting for the first time that its supports seemed old and worm-eaten. I thought that I should not like to take Laura many times across the bridge before it had been strengthened. Then I passed on across a broad meadow covered with sage-brush, where the Jack-rabbits bounded away on either side, not followed to-day by a pistol bullet. Next came a gentle rise of prairie, at the other side of which was a winding water-course, crossed by a gravelly ford.

I turned aside here for a few minutes. A hundred yards away stood a square house, with a high-peaked shingle roof, and walls of dark-grey colour: a four-roomed house of one storey, and newly built, the window-frames shining with fresh white paint, and a Mexican at this very moment putting the last coat of varnish on the front door. The man smiled when he saw me, and raised his hat. It was my own little homestead, very nearly ready for Laura.

The furniture was still in its packing-cases as it had arrived from the East. I had promised Laura that I would touch nothing inside until she was there to see and approve. Outside, however, everything was done, and the bright October sun shone joyously upon the trim stable, two hundred yards away, surrounded by capacious sheep and horse corrals ; on the strip of ploughed land nearer the creek, where we would plant the garden next year ; and upon two long, deep pools below, the best bit of water El Gato Creek could boast. A wire fence enclosed the whole, and ensured immunity from stray cattle and horses. I had paid for this homestead, in hard cash, the price of my first year's crop of wool.

After inspecting the latest arrangements and conversing awhile with Ilario Gallegos, the foreman builder, I turned back upon the road, and presently reached Stockton, a town thirty-five miles south-west of Trinidad, which was the last point reached by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fé Railroad.

Stockton was a quiet and sleepy place at this time—the fall of 1879. A few months later it was stirred to its depths by the railroad, changed its name, and became a city; but as yet it consisted of no more than a dozen dwellings. One was a pretentious three-storied structure, combining the advantages of hotel, restaurant, post-office, and saloon. It was built partly of adobe and partly of wood, and was hideously ugly. Opposite, was Gillespie's Store, a long, low, log-house, where every article required by Western men, from a needle to a repeating rifle, could be procured at prices, called by the proprietor reasonable. And, scattered among the turns and curves of the Chicareeka Creek—a tributary to the river—were a few ranches, homes of the earliest settlers in these parts.

Stockton had been a station as far back as 1860, and a well-known spot to pioneers for thirty years. It was called after its founder, Old Tom Stockton, the first white man who ever settled in Northern New Mexico.

I hitched Comanche to a convenient post before the hotel, made my way to the bar, and asked for letters. I did not expect any, but made the customary request on the chance, and was rewarded by finding a really long epistle from Laura, who had employed a spare hour on the way, before starting upon her long journey.

The place was empty when I arrived, but presently two men strolled in, one of whom shook hands with me heartily. This was Mr. Josiah Gillespie, owner of the store opposite, and a very good friend of ours.

He was a little man, clean shaved except for a heavy military moustache ; with a sallow face, that never changed either in colour or expression under any conceivable circumstances. His eyes were brown and very bright, the shrewd eyes of an American man of business ; he was dressed neatly in black, with spotless linen.

The man who accompanied him was a marked contrast in dress and appearance. A very heavily built fellow, with the

biggest chest I ever saw, and standing six feet six inches in his stockings. He had a face like a square block of brown rock ; big black eyes under shaggy brows tinged with grey ; and he was dressed in riding costume of brown leather overalls, flannel shirt, and a broad-brimmed grey felt hat. Round his waist was a broad belt, filled with cartridges and carrying a pair of Colt's revolvers. He held a whip in his right hand, and a short repeating Winchester carbine in his left, which he carelessly balanced between his finger and thumb. I knew who this must be at once, though we had not met before. It was Jake Blundell, the Sheriff—that is to say, police inspector—for the county.

"Well, Harry," said Mr. Gillespie, signing to the bar-keeper to bring cocktails for three, "so you're here to time ! I suppose your folk are well on their way now past Raton. Did you know that my daughter Nep was in Trinidad ?"

"I heard something of it, sir. Jack told me she was going."

Mr. Gillespie's eyes twinkled.

"Jack? Of course he did. Knew of it before I did, I believe. Is he there?"

I shook my head and smiled.

"He has too much to do this time."

I now raised my glass, and was about to taste its contents, when I heard a whispered oath from the Sheriff and a soft whistle from Mr. Gillespie, which made me put it quickly down. The very person we had been speaking of and imagined to be thirty miles away, was before us—Neptuna Gillespie. I can see the girl now, as she ran up the steps in her picturesque riding dress, with its embroidered buckskin bodice, and light grey habit. She wore a soft felt hat, trimmed with a gleaming rattlesnake skin, below which her dark hair had escaped from the snood which bound it, and fell over her shoulders in glorious confusion. Her face was oval like her father's, her complexion dark brunette, and her eyes large and full. They were keen, courageous eyes, and had

looked mankind in the face without a thought of self-consciousness all her life. Her nose was small, slightly retroussé; the mouth a very firm one, the lips just now tightly pressed together. In figure Nep was slight and delicate, but lithe and well-proportioned as a young leopard; every movement full of a free, careless grace, which only life in the country could have given her—the wild, free life of the Western plains. This was not a moment, however, in which to make a study of her personal appearance. Before we had time to ask a question, or express surprise, she had passed by her father and myself, and laid her hand upon Jake Blundell's arm.

“Oh, I am so glad to have found you, Mr. Blundell!” she said, in a breathless tone; and now we noticed that she had been riding hard, the very brim of her hat being covered with dust. “I feared that you had left town. A terrible thing will happen, unless you can interfere at once.” She paused a moment for breath.

"What is it?" said the Sheriff, briefly, in a businesslike tone.

"First, I must tell you that the morning stage broke down, before it had gone more than a mile out of Trinidad. You may have heard——" here she seemed to catch sight of me for the first time, and she stopped a minute; breaking out then in a choking voice:

"Oh, I am so sorry for you, Harry—so very sorry—but there is not time to tell my news gently. Every minute is precious."

She turned again to the Sheriff; and I stood close behind, and listened to her story silently, with set teeth and whitening lips.

"When the coach broke down—a wheel had come off, I think—the driver got on one of the mules and rode back to town for help. While he was away a buggy with two men in it drove past the wreck, and pulling up, offered, for a small sum, to take two of the passengers as far as Stockton, if any were anxious to reach the

place without delay. The offer was taken by an old gentleman and a young lady. When the stage driver came back, and found what had happened, he was nearly wild, for he knew these men—oh, Harry, keep cool!—they were those two devils and desperadoes, Pete Worrall and Kit Blossie."

Nep stopped again; for Jake upon hearing these names forgot her presence, and growled out a heavy oath, bringing his fist down upon the counter with a mighty bang. He made no other remark, however, and the girl continued:

"Happily, John Foster, the driver, is a man of presence of mind. He got on another mule at once, and galloped back to town with the news. I heard it first, for the friend I was staying with keeps the hotel where the passengers slept last night, and John and I together tried all we knew to raise a posse to follow these villains. But would you believe it? We could not get a man to go. Oh!" exclaimed the girl, stamping her foot, tears of rage in

her eyes, "what cowards men are who live in towns! There were twenty young fellows loafing about the street, but not one would stir, though I drew my revolver, and offered to lead the way. No! they said that the buggy could not be caught up now before it reached Menke's saloon, and that a bloodthirsty crowd would be there, and so on, and so on. Not a man would risk his precious skin for the sake of friendless foreigners, and one of them the most beautiful girl I ever saw. I was at my wits' end. Then I remembered that Menke's was only a few miles from Stockton, and knowing I should find some men here, I saddled my pony, and galloped all the way. And now, Mr. Blundell, how long will it take you to be off—yes—you and Harry?"

She paused, her bright eyes fixed trustingly upon his face, and her hand still upon his arm. But he shook his head and could not meet her look. Then he groaned, and swore softly to himself. At last, he said in a husky voice:

"God help us all, Miss Nep, I kin do nothing—nothing! There's not a dozen men in this place fit to go. Horne's boys were here yesterday, but they started at sun-up for Cimmarron. Some more may come in during the day; but who knows? And meanwhile——"

"But is there no one—no one? Oh! Harry, what are you doing, you are not going alone?"

I have said that I listened to Nep's story in silence. My throat was too parched, and my lips too rigid for any words. Nep gave no names, but she knew who the "helpless foreigners" were, and what they were to me, and I knew—we all knew—what manner of hands they had fallen into. Pete Worrall and Kit Blosse. Oh, merciful Heavens! Laura in their hands. A vision of a wicked, smiling face flashed before me—the face of the devil Kit Blosse, the man I had knocked down. A devilish face! A face full of the wickedness in which the man rejoiced. I could not speak to any one. I could only re-

member that I knew the way to Menke's saloon; and Comanche was still fresh. I was half way to the door when Nep spoke to me. I turned at her words, for I wished to thank her, and said, with difficulty:

"God bless you for this. Yes, I am going. Good-bye."

I turned again to the door, but before I could reach it Jake Blundell had stepped quickly forward and gripped me by the shoulder.

"What are you after?" he said shortly. "Are you gone quite cracked?"

I shook myself free without replying, and laid my hand upon my revolver. He would have spoken again, but Mr. Gillespie said quietly behind:

"Let him alone, Jake. He is mad, but we can't stop him. The girl Pete and Kit have taken was to have been his wife. Poor lad! If we had only a round dozen decent shots, I'd chance it myself."

So they let me go in peace. I went

quickly to Comanche, and began tightening his girths. As I secured the last, I heard a sharp exclamation from Jake Blundell, who was standing at the top of the saloon steps.

"Good Lord, Josiah! d'you see that cuss crossing the creek, and riding into town? Why, if it ain't the black archfiend himself—the biggest devil of the lot—Mike Alison."

I started at the words, and looked in the direction Jake was pointing. Loping towards us at an easy pace, was a man on what they call a buckskin horse—that is a horse, bright yellow, with a black mane. Jake was right. Sitting his horse, Leone, like a pillar of stone, but keenly watching every movement of the men upon the steps, Mike Alison rode up. He nodded and smiled to me; gravely returned a grim salute from the Sheriff; and raised his hat when he saw Nep. I looked at him in silence, wondering whether he knew what had happened, and as he noted the expression of my face, his smile

vanished, and drawing rein beside me, he said abruptly :

“What's happened?”

The others had now joined us. But Mike did not take the slightest notice of them. I cleared my throat to speak distinctly, though the huskiness would not go. “You've saved my life twice, and I have called you my friend. Do you know what Pete Worrall and Kit Blossie are about to-day?”

“I do not. I have been South a few days, and was to meet them at Menke's to-night.”

A great weight left my heart. That man was speaking the truth.

I laid my hand upon his knee.

“Mike, help me again. You are the only man who can.”

“Out with it, lad.”

“I told you—that I was to be married. My girl, I told you, was coming out from England, Laura, her name is—Laura Temple.” The others must have thought me mad to hear me talking to Mike

Alison, of all men in the world, of my love affairs. "I rode in to-day to meet her on the road. But the coach has broken down, and, Mike—Mike—she and her uncle were persuaded by Kit Blossie and Pete Worrall to get into their buggy. They are now at Menke's saloon. And there is not a man in the town to go except myself!"

"That'll do," he replied. The words came from between his teeth like the hiss of a rattlesnake.

"Sheriff!" He wheeled his horse round so suddenly that he brought it upon its haunches. "There is only one way of getting this business done. I must make Menke's at once. But I can't run the whole funeral alone. The other boys will turn on me this time; they're bound to. Can you bring up a posse to see the end of it?"

Jake Blundell's face, as he was asked this unexpected question, was a sight to see. But he answered heartily:

"You bet I will, Mike, if I can

find any boys. But they're derved scarce.

"That's not your fault. If you can, follow me with a crowd in an hour. If not—well—I must run the funeral alone. It won't be the first time."

He settled himself in the saddle. I had mounted while he was speaking to the Sheriff, and now did the same; but he turned upon me with a shake of the head.

"You must follow with the boys."

I shrugged my shoulders contemptuously.

"Talk sense, please!"

He gave me a keen glance, then laying his hand upon my wrist, and pressing his finger upon the pulse, said sharply:

"Look at me."

I did so, and he continued:

"Now, Harry, just listen! The business before us, to be any good, must be done coolly. We shall be two among twenty. If you lose your head we're done. Now can you go into Men's's saloon with me,

and shake hands with these men, without knowing what may have happened? Can you stand, and talk, while your heartstrings are being torn to pieces by suspense? Can you sit down to a game of cards with the boys, when you long to see 'em all lying dead? Can you keep quiet, and unconcerned in manner, speech, and bearing, doing what I do, and saying what I say, until I give the word? If so, if your nerves are strong enough, then come; but not otherwise. I say nothing of the risk; I know you're not afraid. Remember, it is for her."

While he spoke Mike kept his eyes fixed upon mine with a searching, eager expression. I returned his look steadily.

"I understand all you say. I will go with you. I will be as cool as you yourself, Mike."

"Right! But — ah, there's another thing! Have you practised any with your six-shooter since I saw you last?"

"I can shoot a prairie dog at twenty yards,"

“So? Can you kill it? Or does it slip back wounded into its hole?”

“No; I pick up the body.”

“Then you’ll do. Vamos!”

CHAPTER IV

MENKE'S

AT the moment when Nep Gillespie startled us all by her sudden appearance, Mr. Menke, a few miles away, was leaning lazily against the door-post of his saloon, slowly whittling away a piece of deal with a long jack-knife.

He was a German, with a flat, expressionless face, light hair, and eyes of a dull, fishy blue. A flabby man, who gave one the impression, that lounging in the sun, and drinking a great deal of beer, were the principal occupations of his life. He seldom spoke, and then said little worth hearing ; and strangers put him down as a stupid Dutchman, with as much intellectual ability as one of his own whisky barrels.

But a cunning brain was lodged in

Hermann Menke's thick head, above his lack-lustre eyes. Heaven only knows what the previous life of this man had been. Perhaps he had once been a simple German peasant in a quiet village, going to church on Sunday morning, and to dancing on Sunday evening. But no pen could describe the scenes he must have witnessed—the orgies, the gambling, drinking, fighting, murdering, and devilry—during the ten years he had kept his drinking-shop—a saloon frequented by all the lawless desperadoes of the country round—at Bear Cañon, on the western side of the Chicareeka Mountain.

He was a man without any friends, a solitary man with no wife, or children, who lived in this saloon and dispensed the drinks, and the cards, and dodged the shots when the revolvers came out. But he was not, himself, regarded as an outlaw ; quite the contrary ; he visited everybody ; only six days, in fact, before the stage broke down, he was peeling his bit of board on the steps of Gillespie's store, dis-

cussing in his slow way with the master the news of the country, and the politics of the State. There were many reasons for the wide acquaintance enjoyed by Menke among the ranche folk of the neighbourhood. We will mention three. He had the largest command of ready money of any man about, and never refused any one a loan on good security. No crime had ever been brought directly home to him, though his place was known to be little better than a den of thieves; and he had a skin tougher than raw-hide for taunt, snub, or sarcasm: no man was able to boast that he had ever disturbed Menke's equanimity.

But his true resting-place, where he loved to dwell, was his old, weather-beaten saloon. Here, all the year round, came visitors of grim aspect, and uncertain occupation, who sometimes brought acquaintances from the East to drink and play. These Eastern folk, it was said, were seldom heard of again by their friends at home, and no man knew exactly what

became of them. That, of course, had nothing to do with Menke. When questioned on the subject, he said that he supplied liquor, which he warranted to be genuine ; and that he provided good beds. If his customers would fall out over their cards, and settle their quarrel with knife and pistol, it was regrettable, but not his business ; and, as for the dead bodies after a fight, no one could say that he did not give good burial to all, with a pile of stones on top to baulk the coyotes. There were the piles of stones, in fact, outside his saloon for all the world to see. That his saloon had a bad name, he did not deny ; but it had been established ten years ; nobody had ever brought any charge against him ; and he was well acquainted with Jake Blundell, the County Sheriff. It was perfectly true that Mike Alison, Pete Worrall, and their friends were gone customers of his ; they came as they pleased ; they paid for their drinks ; as for their characters, they might be all that the world said ; he asked no questions ; he did

not know their affairs, they had nothing to do with him. That was all Hermann Menke had to say, and it had been quite enough for Frontier folk up to this twenty-first day of October, 1879, when the stage broke down. For nearly half an hour Menke lounged at his open door, with his dog dozing at his feet, and such grasshoppers as the early frosts had spared chirping peacefully around him. Inside the saloon were twenty men, the majority sitting in various attitudes of listless vacancy, as if waiting for something to happen; a few languidly playing poker, for five-cent points. After a while, a man strolled out and looked at the prospect.

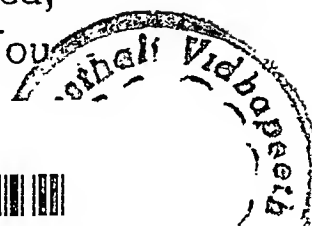
"They're late to-day, Hermann," he observed, in an impatient, irritable tone.

"Ah, it is so. P'r'aps the game is heavy to carry this time. Eh! It is possible—very possible. No?"

"We—ll," remarked the other, with a peculiarly round full-flavoured oath, aimed, apparently, at creation in general. "You

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ought to know, if any one. And, if it is so, why I hope it'll come quick. That cursed Mike is to be back to-night, and if there's anything spicy on when he turns up, he's dead sure to spoil the fun."

"Ya-yah!" said Menke, in sympathetic tones. "Mike is hard on you boys—I will say dat, very! Yet—he can shoot, lad! shoot like black Nick. His bullet always reaches the soft, tender spot, and none come near him, not at all—at all."

The speaker chuckled grimly.

His companion replied with another oath more emphatic than the first.

"Shoot! Yes. And so almighty free with it. He'll as soon plug a friend as foe—if not sooner. Look how he put a hole through Townshend—thick as they were the day before. And all for laying hold of a little ranche girl, who'd mistaken the saloon for an hotel, and was fair game. But, there! It was a woman. And when you've said that, you've said everything as far as Mike is concerned. Let there be

a girl in the case, and whew ! I'd sooner face a mountain lion in a cage with a broken pocket-knife in my hand, than Mike Alison. I don't mind a man bein' a bit free with the shootin' iron when he's drunk. But that cuss never drinks. He never laughs ; he scarcely ever swears. Ugh, he gives me the shivers ! Hello ! there's the buggy, at last. And, look ! Blamed if that aint a petticoat. A gurl, by the Lord, a gurl ! Hi, boys ! Come out of that, every one of you and look here ! ”

Trotting briskly down the long hill, at the bottom of which Menke's saloon nestled picturesquely among the rocks and cedar trees, was a carriage containing four people. Out turned all the men, forming an eager, expectant group round the door, and giving vent to a chorus of whispered exclamations, as they saw the flutter of a white dress, in the back seat of the buggy.

The vehicle approached quickly, and the faces of its occupants were soon distinctly visible. The men now became silent, their

eyes opened to their fullest width, and a deep, involuntary sigh of admiration and pleasure escaped them.

The Western cowboy of the lower class has the most limited acquaintance with women that it is possible to imagine. I have been told in all seriousness more than once by one, "that he had not spoken to a woman for five years," and I believe the statement was almost strictly true. Judge then of the feelings of these men, as they stared, for the first time in their lives, at the face of an English girl.

A fair face, with delicate, regular features; large blue eyes of the intent earnest kind; a complexion so pure and fresh that it was not necessary to hear her speak to guess her nationality. Above the white forehead were shining bands of golden hair, bound neatly back, though one or two had escaped from bondage to-day, and waved in the wind rebelliously.

Laura was dressed simply in white, with a blue ribbon at her throat, and a plain straw hat. She wore no ornaments, except

the brooch which secured the ribbon, and therefore looked exactly what she was, a refined, sweet English lady.

The buggy stopped, and Kit Blossie, the driver, swung himself down, and opened the carriage door.

"But this is not Stockton!" said the other passenger, a stout gentleman with white whiskers, dressed in shooting costume, and looking intensely British.

"You can go no further," answered Pete Worrall, who was sitting opposite to him. "We must trouble you to get out for a while. Come. It ain't no good foolin' round, old man, and gettin' hot. Out with ye. Boys, just lend a hand——"

But Pete did not finish his sentence. He was of a hasty disposition, and, instead of giving his passengers time to realise their position by degrees, laid hold of Mr. Temple roughly by the shoulder. He had much mistaken his man. White hair does not always mean want of muscle. Imagining the fellow to be drunk—for Pete had applied himself more than once to a brandy

flask on the way—Mr. Temple grappled with him, and grasping his throat with both hands, pushed him backwards with such goodwill, that he lost his balance, and ignominiously turned a somersault over the splash-board of the buggy, landing abruptly on his head.

This turning of the tables amused the crowd mightily, and when Pete rose from the ground with many oaths, and passed his hand round for his pistol, there was a hearty laugh, accompanied with a warning cry :

“Hold up, now! The old man was right. Keep your fingers away from there!”

And, head of the gang though he was, Pete was obliged to submit with a bad grace, and leave Kit Blossie to escort the passengers, with marked politeness, to a small room behind the main apartment of the saloon.

Mr. Temple had now recovered from the effect of the scrimmage, and though much puzzled at the whole proceeding, was some-

what reassured by the manner of the younger man. "A good-looking fellow at one time, I should think," he said afterwards. "But his beauty was interfered with by a bruised nose, and a pair of eyes that had not long ago been very black—a kick from a horse, he told us."

When the old gentleman made a second attempt to discover the precise position of affairs, Kit Blossie smiled and looked at Laura.

"Western hospitality, sir. You see, it ain't often that the boys have the pleasure of seeing a lady in these parts, and we thought we'd give 'em a treat. Oh, we'll move on to Stockton presently."

He spoke slowly, and to the last word never removed his eyes from the girl's face.

Mr. Temple's heart ached. Oh, for a good horsewhip, and youth and strength and time wherewith to lay it on!

"But I have paid my niece's fare and my own for a direct journey to Stockton. Tell me, man, what do you mean?"

Kit Blossie sighed and shook his head, then softly chuckled as he glanced at the old gentleman's red, excited face.

"Well, you see, my friend," he said, slowly—and again his eyes returned to contemplation of Laura — "it's this way——"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Temple, bitterly. "You need not go on. I see that we are in the hands of scoundrels. I suppose you are aware that I am not without friends here?"

"Here?" said Kit, raising his eyebrows. "That's curious! None of the boys seemed to recognise you."

"I mean in this country," roared the old gentleman, stamping his foot; "about Stockton and the neighbourhood!"

"Oh, Stockton," said Kit, reflectively. "Do you know how far we are off Stockton?"

Mr. Temple was silent. The country was utterly strange to him. They might be fifty miles away.

"At any rate, sir, I am an English

citizen. If anything should happen to me or my niece, you would pay dearly for it—dearly for it.”

The young man opened his eyes wide at this threat, and then threw back his head and laughed aloud.

“That’s so good a joke that I must just clear off and tell the boys. Oh, Lord, how rich! Well, my noble Englishman, our boss, Mike Alison—who’ll be here, I dessay, before you leave—came from the little island a few years ago. Put your case before him if you think by his face that he’ll be scared by the British Government. Now, I’m goin’. You’ll be comfortable, I hope—and the young lady. We shall meet again before long, and see more of one another.”

He went slowly out and closed the door, locking it after him with a distinct and deliberate click.

Mr. Temple hastily glanced round the room. There was a small window a foot square, with a stout iron bar across it, and another door, just ajar, which opened into

the saloon itself. The sound of loud, coarse voices came from this side, and Mr. Temple's first action was to close the door smartly. Even then, there being only a thin wooden partition between the rooms, the buzz of conversation was still faintly audible; and presently, when two men strolled up the room and seated themselves close by the partition, the prisoners could hear what they were saying, and recognised the tones of the men by whom they had been entrapped. For some little time, however, Mr. Temple and Laura were too much occupied with each other to pay attention to anything else.

When Kit finally took himself off, the old gentleman silently drew the girl towards him and kissed her. She looked at him wistfully, with a half-puzzled expression.

"Uncle Geoffrey, do tell me exactly what you think these men are going to do with us?"

He put his arms round her, clasped her close, and shook his head.

"My dear, my dear, how can I? Yet I must tell you—I must tell you, that—I—fear the worst!"

"And don't you think there is any chance of Harry? But no, there is none," she added, hastily. "Don't speak."

She put her finger on his lip, and then hid her face in his breast for awhile. Presently, she raised her head, and resolutely brushed away the tears.

"It is very weak of me to give way like this. But it is so sudden, so unexpected, so terrible; and I cannot help thinking of our poor boy waiting for us, and wondering what can have happened. I was not thinking of myself, or of you, dear. Perhaps I had better do so, and then I shall not cry."

He laid his cheek upon hers.

"My brave girl." She felt the hot tears dropping one by one.

They did not speak again for some time. Now and then Laura shuddered slightly, and Mr. Temple's face grew so pale and

wan, that his friends would have scarcely recognised him.

Meanwhile, the two voices in the saloon rose and fell, and, by-and-by, the prisoners began to listen to what was said.

The men seemed to be heated with drink, one was laughing, the other in bad humour.

"Curse the luck," they heard him say; it was Pete Worrall. "I haven't been so much out of it for months. Your deal, Kit."

"Right, mio amigo, so—so! Right bower here; my trick again. Only twenty more points to make, and then the stakes are mine, my boy. Plucky old cuss, her uncle! Never saw you turn a neater skyer. Well, don't get mad. Remember——" and here he whispered something that Laura could not hear, but which Mr. Temple did: and he clenched his fists and groaned, longing, perhaps, for a revolver, which he would not have known how to use. He kept still, however, listening for more. Kit was laughing again.

"Nothing like cards, with a decent glass beside one, to decide important business, I don't want the money, blast it! You and the boys can have that, but—well, play, man, play, it's your turn. What's that? A king. There you are, then, mine again. Gosh! Time's drawing on. I must have a peep at her in a minute. But we'll settle this first. If my luck sticks to me, this round will be the last. Only five points to win."

He felt silent now, and as his harsh voice ceased, Laura raised her head once more. Mr. Temple's eyes were bent on the ground. He took something from his waistcoat-pocket, and held it concealed in his right hand. Then he stole a glance at his companion, and seeing that her eyes were bright and steady, and her head erect, lifted his eyes, and gazed steadfastly into her face. The colour fled from the girl's cheeks, as she met his look; but her eyes grew brighter and never swerved from his.

"Laura, do you know what they mean?"

She made no reply.

Slowly, very slowly, he opened his right hand, watching her furtively the while. In the palm of his hand, lay a pocket-knife; the blade of it seemed to be no more than two inches long.

The girl looked at it a moment, then took it from him and opened the big blade.

"It will do," she whispered, handing it back. "You will drive it straight—straight to my heart—will you not?"

Mr. Temple nodded. He was past all speech. Laura fell upon her knees, and covered her face; but her uncle could not pray. He bent over the girl with set teeth, firmly grasping the open knife in his hand. He was old; he had lived a quiet life in law-abiding England; and now, in his age, he had come abroad—to kill the child!

And while the girl waited on her knees, and the old man watched for the time to deal the blow, in the saloon outside Hermann Menke stood at the bar and

passed the whisky bottle—it was nothing to him—and the two men played their game, and the others looked on. Five minutes more and the game would be finished. Well; it was nothing to Hermann Menke.

CHAPTER V

THE GAME AND THE STAKES

A RACE for life and death. We had ten miles of rough country to cover, and we did it in less than an hour.

The horses seemed to understand the urgency of the case—what does not an intelligent horse understand?—and neither rough nor smooth, up hill nor down hill, made any difference to their pace. A creek was reached with steep crumbling banks ; a spot which, under ordinary circumstances, I should have ridden a mile out of my way to avoid. Now, I led the way, and Comanche was at the bottom with one leap, and up the opposite side with another, more like a young prong-horned antelope, than an elderly cow-pony. On, through dark cañons, and over rolling

prairie; past a ranche, where the stockman paused in his work and laid his thumb on his revolver at sight of Black Mike; removing it, as we dashed by, and rubbing his nose reflectively, wondering what devilment the cuss had in view to-day, and whether the Sheriff was after him.

At last Mike raised his hand and pointed. Half a mile ahead a wreath of blue smoke was curling slowly up from a grey chimney, among a grove of trees.

"Menke's," he said laconically. "Not a sign now, Harry, nor a look, until I give the word."

I nodded. My pulse beat no faster; my face did not change in expression. They told me afterwards that it was as colourless as a dead man's. I believe that at this moment the despair which possessed me had affected my mind. Happily the conduct of the business which followed was in the hands of one whose nerves were at their steadiest, whose brain

was at its clearest, in a crisis such as this.

Mike Alison was in his element. Not a shade of anxiety was visible in his face, as we drew up before the main door of the saloon, and he greeted two men on the steps in the cheeriest tone I had ever heard him use.

"Well, boys, and how's things? Worrall and Blossie here?"

"Yes, boss. Inside, playing."

"So? And what are they playing for?"

The men grinned, and jerked their thumbs in the direction of the small room behind the saloon.

"Big stakes."

Mike laughed.

"Ha, ha! Cunning dogs! I heard there was something in the wind. I'm earlier than I intended, and come in for the fun after all. Never mind, let 'em play; let 'em play—it'll do them good. No, thanks, we won't look at the stakes yet. Plenty of time for that; and Worrall might not

like it. He's boss here. We'll drop in to see him and his partner first. By-the-by, you remember this man!" pointing to me. "I picked him up on the way here, and asked him to come along for a bit of a game. Get down, Harry. Now, boys, let's have a drink all round. I'm as dry as a mosquito in June."

Thus, speaking in a tone loud enough for all the world to hear, Mike dismounted leisurely, stepped across the porch, and carelessly tilting his sombrero back with his right hand, entered Menke's saloon.

He was greeted with a silence that could be felt. It was the shadow of the hawk over the chicken-yard.

"Come, stand to, stand to, those who'll have anything," said Mike, in a cheery tone, his eyes slipping rapidly from face to face, until he caught sight of two men in the further corner of the room.

"Mr. Menke"—shaking hands with the saloon-keeper—"how are you? Business is brisk to-day. So, I hear you've Eastern visitors again. Well, gentlemen, and

what'll you have? All right; 'five cocktails, two sherry cobblers, three lagers, and one egg-nog. Serve 'em out, Mr. Menke, and put it down to me. Thanks; and now, Joe, tell me what you've all been up to?"

Mike was now stirring a glass of brandy, and smiling amiably, his back against the counter and his legs comfortably crossed. The ominous silence and looks askance, which had heralded his first appearance, subsided. The players resumed their play, the drinkers sipped their whisky, and only two men near the wooden partition at the further end of the room still kept their eyes on the new comers. These were Worrall and Blossie. They did not come forward to greet us.

"And so," said Mike, after hearing Joe's account of the arrival, and critically examining the contents of his glass—a sip between each word—"this raid is entirely the funeral of Pete and Kit!"

"Yes; but we're to have a share of what's on the old man."

"Of course," chimed in Mike, gravely.

"Well, Harry, I guess, if you've had enough whisky, we'll move up a little, and hunt for a vacant table and two partners. I feel rather like beginning that game I promised you. The bill, Menke."

As Mike spoke he stretched himself and yawned. Then he paid his money leisurely, pocketed the change, and with slow and careless step made his way towards the upper end of the saloon.

I followed closely. We were in a large oblong room, the door at which we entered opening at one end close to the bar. There was a stove here, lighted even in this warm weather, and six men sitting round it smoking, with their feet on the top, and their chairs tilted back as far as they might safely go. Beyond the stove, which we now left behind us, and stretching to the wooden partition near which Worrall and Blossie had seated themselves, were two lines of small tables for cards, each accommodating four players.

We went about half-way up the room,

and then Mike stopped to lay his hand with a short greeting on the shoulder of a card player. At the touch and sound the man rose quickly and motioned towards the table.

"Will you come in, Mike? Me and Bill are only fooling for a few cents."

"No, Josh. You're in the middle of a round. There's no hurry. We'll watch you a bit. Plenty of time for our game, eh, Harry?"

He turned to me with a smile; but at the same moment trod sharply on my toe.

I had now to put the greatest pressure upon myself to preserve an easy bearing, and not excite attention from those around. The allusion to Laura by the men, the knowledge that we were close by her, had completely broken down the benumbed, hopeless despair. It was well that ordinary Western life gives a man a grim face; it was well that Mike had warned me of the danger before I started. Had it not been for this, I must have aroused the deepest suspicion.

At last I could bear the suspense no longer, and softly pressing Mike's foot, said as carelessly as I could, though the hollowness of my voice startled me :

"When is the fun to begin? I came here expecting a game. It's a long time coming."

Mike turned quickly with a significant nod.

"All right, lad, in a minute. You're too impatient. Thanks, Bill; well, I guess we'll come. Mr. Menke, a new deck of cards here."

We were standing close together. Mike now leant towards me, and slapping his pocket as if his words had reference to money, whispered :

"I've had to keep quiet so long to get 'em off the scent. They suspected our game when we first turned up. Now the course is clear. There's only one thing to say : keep yourself still, and don't look at Kit until I say 'Short Cut.' Then pull as quick as you please, back up against me, and cover the boys at the bar. The

moment a six-shooter comes out begin to fire, and keep on till I tell you to stop. Quiet, now; here's Kit with the news. Steady!"

With a step not quite so sure as it had been an hour ago, Kit Blossie came towards us between the rows of card tables, and holding out his hand with a grin, shook both Mike's and my own warmly.

"Very glad to see ye, by George!" he said hoarsely. "We were finishing a game, Pete and me, so I didn't come round before. Are you going to play? Well, you must excuse me." Here he smiled so broadly that he showed every tooth in his head.

"And what are you going to do, Kit?" said Mike, shuffling the cards Menke had handed to him with an absent air.

"Do—eh? Do? Oh, I've been playing Pete here for high stakes, that's all, and I've beat him. And now I'm going to count the winnings."

Again he held out his hand, with a drunken chuckle, but somehow I contrived not to see it; so with a grunt he went slowly back again towards the door in the wooden partition.

As he left us Mike deposited his cards quickly on the table, and glanced keenly after the retreating figure. Kit had stopped half-way, and was now leaning over the back of a chair talking to some one.

“Is this a full pack, Hermann?”

There was a general laugh. As if any one would think of giving Mike Alison a short one.

“Well, I must count it and see. Come, gather up your stakes, boys, and don’t stare at us; we’re ready.”

The man called Bill now moved to one side; and with a quick, decided motion, Mike began to count.

“Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two.” Again I felt a pressure on my foot, and saw him put down two cards together; “twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five.”

Kit had now concluded his conversation, and resumed his progress towards the door. The cards were passing swiftly through Mike's hands, but he was not looking at them. "Forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight." Kit was close to the partition. Pete Worrall, half-risen from his chair, was peering intently after him.

"Short Cut!"

It was the word at last.

With a swift movement, Mike stepped forward, facing the wooden partition, holding in each hand a cocked revolver. Crack, the double report rang out in the low-roofed saloon with a smothered roar. Through the stifling smoke, I dimly saw the tall figure near the door sway to and fro like a tower undermined with gunpowder, totter, and fall forwards with the heavy unmistakable thud of a dead man. At the same moment came a crash of breaking wood. The man at the table close by had sprung up with a sharp, convulsive cry, and stumbling backwards

over his chair, smashed it to fragments.

As Mike gave the word, I drew my revolver, and standing against him, back to back, passed the muzzle slowly round the faces in front of me. At the same time, clearly audible above the yell of the startled crowd, came his warning.

“Steady! steady! The first who puts his finger on his pistol will go to Kingdom Come. Steady, I say, steady!”

For a few seconds no one moved, There were only five men in front of me at this time, and these the least concerned in the matter. The rest, furious though they were, and bound by the only code of honour they possessed to avenge this outrage at all costs, stood quelled by the man who feared nothing; who never missed his aim; and who, for five years past, had never failed for good or ill to keep his word.

But this could not last. In a few minutes we must have been fighting for our lives, the odds against us—ten to one. At this

moment, however, there was a loud shout from Menke, who was watching the scene from behind a whisky barrel. The door near the bar flew open, and Jake Blundell, followed by thirty cowboys with their rifles at the ready, came hastily in.

Mike turned his head at the welcome sound, and as the desperadoes became as quiet as mice and raised their hands in token of submission, he exclaimed promptly :

“Hold up, Jake.”

Which just came in time to save the lives of Menke and the men I was covering.

In trooped the new-comers, and Mike Alison and the Sheriff shook hands for the first time in their lives. Nep Gillespie was with the rescue party, and now came up to me, pale and anxious.

“Where are they ? ”

I pointed to the partition.

“I am just going to see.”

“You wait,” she said, quickly, holding my arm. Then, raising her voice,

addressed the Sheriff, "Mr. Blundell, will you please take care that no one leaves this place until I have been into the room behind, alone? The passengers from the stage are there."

Jake nodded, and looked down upon her approvingly.

"Boys," he roared, "up with the rifles again, and, if there's a movement, anywhere, let go."

"If the girl's been so much as spoken rough," he continued, glaring upon the gang, "not one who saw them taken in shall leave this place alive—not one living soul. Steady with yer repeaters, boys. We're ready, Miss Nep. You go forward now. If the news is bad, say 'Yes.' If all's safe, 'No.' Then we shall know what to do. Keep still, Thornton, it'll be all over in a minute."

Then, amid a silence so profound that the champing of the horses outside could be plainly heard, Nep opened the door, gave a little cry, and passed quickly in. Paying no attention to Jake, I followed

her, and, standing over Kit Blossse's dead body, waited breathlessly. Now the door-handle was turned again, and Nep reappeared; she stepped aside for me to pass in, and then said quietly, "NO."

CHAPTER VI

FRIEND OR FOE?

I MAY pass over what followed, and the unutterable thankfulness we felt towards these brave men. The only bitter drop in our happiness was the extraordinary behaviour of the man to whom we owed most of all—Mike Alison. I introduced him to Laura. I made him promise to come and see us, but when, an hour later, I went to speak to him again, I found that he had gone, no one knew whither. All I could discover was that he had ridden away alone, without a word to a soul, in a northerly direction. It was the Sheriff who supplied me with this information. He did so, in an abrupt and peculiar tone which I did not like.

But there was no help for it, and in the

excitement of the time I fear I easily forgot even Mike Alison ; nor, until the evening of the second day after that terrible hour in Menke's saloon, did I think of him again.

We were a large party at Temple's ranche that evening. Not only were the new arrivals with us, but Nep was here, and Jake Blundell, the Sheriff—an uninvited, but not the less welcome, guest. No one could be better company than Jake when he pleased, and while the ladies remained with us, he kept us all in a continual roar of laughter with his racy stories of the west. But when the ladies retired and we men drew round the fire for one last smoke before turning in, Jake's manner changed. He rose to his feet with so sudden a movement that his chair was nearly overturned ; drank off his whisky at a draught, and throwing the stump of his cigar into the fire began to speak, in deliberate and impressive voice :

“Friends, I'm goin' to say a thing for which there may be folk—” and here he

looked at me—"who'll cry, 'blame him fur an interferin', backbitin', spiteful meddler.' Wa'al, now I've reckoned to chance this. For, sez I, where's the good of bein' Sheriff of this county, if I don't do my duty all round—private as well as public?

"Now, what I've on my mind is this: a man here got acquainted in a pecooliar kind o' way with Mike Alison. This Mike Alison, whom we all know—and we needn't go out of our way to call him names—quite contrairy to his own nature, does more'n one real handsome thing by this man, and he, bein' impetuous inclined, and not seein' or knowin' the other side of the cuss, sez, 'Be my friend.' 'I will,' sez Mike. And, boys, I ain't the one to say as he didn't mean it honest and square—when he said it. But a bit later a young lady comes out—the purtiest morsel, I'm willing to swear, as was ever seen on this airth, or any other. Under circumstances we all know about Mike Alison sees this young lady, and from the moment he sets eyes on

her—" here the Sheriff raised his voice, and emphasised each word—"he never ceases lookin' at her ontill she's out o' sight. Well, you say, why shouldn't he look at such a girl? Many an honest man would stare his eyes out and no blame to him. Ay, that's so; but he wouldn't look as Mike Alison looked. No, nor he wouldn't bow as he bowed, nor he wouldn't, after all this, ride away sudden-like as he did, unless he meant mischief. Boys, Harry Thornton has asked Mike Alison to visit here, and I kin see by his face that nothing I can say will persuade him to countermand the invite. But dew you just remember that I am speaking with twenty years' experience of such as he and I say—beware of him! Keep your eyes well greased when he's around. Don't let that girl out of your sight one moment, as you value your souls. I tell you, if that man comes prowlin' around here with a free hand, there will be trouble—there will I know."

Jake sat down and wiped his brow. The

close proximity in which he had stood to the fire, and his own excitement, made him perspire as if it were the middle of summer. No one spoke for a minute. I was too angry to trust myself, and the others too much astonished. At last Jack said, in his dryest tone :

“ So you have invited Mike Alison to the ranche, Harry ? You might have waited until you had a place of your own.”

“ I shall be happy to receive him in the stable, if you please,” I replied, “ if you won’t have him here. Laura and I will do our best to make him comfortable.”

My partner shrugged his shoulders.

“ Of course he’s free to come, as you’ve asked him, and we must hope for the best. I shall be glad, though, for your own sake, when you are a little wiser.”

“ Thanks. I hope it will be some time before it becomes my practice to turn a cold shoulder upon a man who has done more for me, out of pure disinterestedness, than any one I have ever met. Don’t forget, Jack, that he saved my life twice :

once from Indians, and once from horse thieves. And now he has saved Laura."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Temple, "we must not forget that."

"I don't want you to forget it, Harry. You are under the greatest obligations to this man, and if you ever get a chance you must repay him. But as for asking him to this ranche—" Jack shrugged his shoulders ; "by-the-by," he went on, "you told me once how he started at Laura's name. When was that ?"

"The night the Indians burnt my camp."

"Yes. How much disinterested kindness had he shown before that ?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"It depends!" was the dry reply.

I was silent. There was a nasty flavour in Jack's words. We had never got to the bottom of this. Then I thought of those true grey eyes, and I turned to the Sheriff.

"I don't want to impute any bad

motives to you, Jake Blundell, but I must say this: I think your suspicions are utterly unfounded. I do not care one straw about Mike Alison's history; no doubt he has done things. But I believe in him. I believe he means well and honestly by us. I shall not either by word or look treat him otherwise than as a most true friend. But I will repeat to Miss Temple what you have said, and so put her on her guard. If she believes your statements, I will act accordingly. At the same time I must beg you to distinctly understand that I will not allow a word to be spoken against Mike Alison in my presence. Whatever he may have done to others, he has been a true friend to me."

I rose now, and went into the next room to lay down sheepskins and blankets. Through the open door I could see that Kirk Troy had risen from his seat, and was peering at the Sheriff with a look of intent interest, and I heard Jake's muttered comment on my words.

“Foolish boy, foolish boy! I knew he'd take it in this way. S'elp me, gentlemen, I've no spite agin that man; but I know what I'm sayin', and I say again, and yet again, there—will—be—trouble. We have not heard the last of Mike Alison.”

CHAPTER VII

AT EAGLE TAIL RANCHE

THE next morning Jake Blundell returned to town. He said nothing more to me about Mike; but I overheard a remark to Jack when he was taking leave.

“You may be sure I’ll keep my eyes and ears open, and watch him and his gang keeferful enough. There’s others on the job, also, nearer head-quarters than me.”

Later in the day I saddled Comanche, and brought out a little bay mare, Jack’s wedding present to Laura, which for some time past I had ridden daily myself with a blanket round my knees, and was now able to pronounce perfectly safe. We were starting on our first expedition to the new ranche.

On the way I told Laura of what had passed on the preceding evening. Never, before or since, have I seen her quite so angry.

"How abominable to say such things! Mr. Alison look at me in an impertinent manner? Nothing of the kind. He was most polite. I don't care what he has done. I would trust myself alone with that man, Harry, as readily as I would with Uncle Geoffrey."

"And for Jack, too, to mistrust him! as well mistrust Nep—But oh! Harry, my dear"—and here Laura smiled all over her face in such a way that I found it necessary to institute an interruption—"are they engaged?"

"You mean Nep and Jack? Certainly not."

"But they are so much together; and I am certain he cares for her, and that she knows it."

"I daresay; but does he know that she knows it? Remember we are in America. Jack and I have only known Nep for the

past twelve months ; previous to that she was at school in the East. So, they are friends. There's not a bachelor for twenty miles round who does not rave about her, and Jack has a dozen ardent rivals, if he has one. I hope you are right, I am sure, for she is really an exceedingly well educated girl, and a true lady at heart, though she does carry a revolver, and can ride a bucking horse."

"Yes, I am sure she is. And yet, I cannot quite understand these American friendships. She rides with Jack, alone. Are her other friends granted similar privileges ? And if they are not, why doesn't he say something ? One reads of such things in books. I can't say I like it."

"Indeed ?" I answered smiling. "I do, immensely. Nep and I have ridden together scores of times. Alas ! those days are over now for me."

"Are they ? It didn't look like it this morning when you were showing her your revolver, and cleaning hers."

And so we chatted gaily on, pursuing

our journey leisurely. We were now within sight of El Gato Creek, and were just going to break into a lope, when we saw Mr. Gillespie approaching us on the road from town.

He was dressed as usual in neat black clothes; but he had now donned a pair of smart riding-boots, with remarkably high heels, and duly spurred; a full-size Colt's revolver was hanging from his waist, and he rode a wild-looking, raw-boned cowpony. Altogether he was the most curious compound of civilised storekeeper and Western stockman ever seen.

He saluted us with gravity, though his brown eyes twinkled merrily.

"Wa-al, Miss Laura, you don't look so much the worse. Wonderful revivin' power in New Mexican air, Harry! How's the old gentleman? Rather used up? Ay, he looked it. He'll soon pull round, though. You Britishers are tough. What he went through would have killed most of the Eastern men I know."

"So, friends, I won't keep you. I see

you are worried with business. I am just tottin' down to have a look at my little girl, and to tell Jack that I've had an offer for the wool he left with me, which might suit him. By-the-by, I've some bad news for you. The American parson's sick and has gone home for a spell. I doubt whether he'll taste Jack's champagne until the New Year."

Here was a terrible state of things.

"Why, what has happened to him?"

Mr. Gillespie gave his mouth a comical twist.

"Ah! that's hard telling—very! The official bulletin says 'severe indisposition and rheumatic affections in the limbs.' I should be inclined to have said, hankerings after thanksgiving-day, pumpkin-pies and whisky fixin's! It's a fact, however, that he's gone, and that there's no one to run your funeral—I beg pardon, marriage—until he comes back. P'raps he'll turn up before Christmas, if not, you'd better fetch him. Adios."

We rode on slowly in silence. Had I

been alone, I should have used strong language concerning that parson. There was no help for it, though; and Laura reminded me that the preparations which had yet to be made were so many that two months would very soon pass, and our home be all the more complete and comfortable at the end of it. The worst point was the probable state of the weather. I solemnly swore, however, there and then, that if this parson should make any excuse by reason of the cold, I would follow Mr. Gillespie's advice and fetch him, if I had to carry a lasso along and tie him down.

Two months we had to wait before that parson would come back to his Western ministrations—two months. To Laura the time was spent in learning the manners and customs of her new home, in arranging the furniture at our ranche, in riding the pony I had broken in for her, and in going about the country with Nep, Jack, and myself.

Only one incident happened during this time.

This was the promised visit of Mike Alison.

It is curious what a fatality there is about some things in this world. The very first day that business called Jack and myself to town together, and the ranche was left in the charge of Kirk, Sarah Brunt and the girls, when for three weeks previously we had never left them unprotected for a single hour, Mike must needs take it into his head to pay that visit.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that he came. Nep was lying back on the couch, reading a novel ; Laura was amusing herself turning over some music, old and new, trying this and that on the piano ; Sarah Brunt was busy about household work in the kitchen ; and Kirk Troy was in the stable mending harness. He was the first to hear the sound of approaching hoofs, and looking out, saw the well-known buckskin horse on the road from town, pacing steadily towards the ranche. Throwing down his work, he tore to the house. His half-crazed brain was

nearly turned with terror ; he had sucked in every word spoken by Jake Blundell. More than that he remembered it all, and he believed that the most frightful things were about to happen right away. And yet, though long before Mike reached the place, Kirk had taken a loaded rifle from the rack, and drawn the dog-head back to the full, it was characteristic of his weakened brain that he never warned the girls of their danger, nor went out boldly to meet the supposed villain. Instead of this, he skulked behind the door between bedroom and kitchen, and, in answer to Mike's whistle, Sarah Brunt made her appearance alone.

At sight of Black Mike, even the stout heart of the spinster beat more quickly than usual, though she braced herself to meet the difficulty in a becoming spirit.

"Good day, ma'am !" said the newcomer, in mild accents. "Any one at home ?"

"Not a creetur, except me and Kirk Troy" was the prompt answer.

"Is that so?" and Mike smiled, for at this moment, Laura struck up a spirited march, which could have been heard a mile. Sarah Brunt put her arms akimbo, and tossed her head.

"Oh, of course the girls is in; but I didn't count them, as I knew they'd nothing to do with you. Come round at sundown again, if you're passin'. Jack and Harry will be at home, then."

"Thanks," was the tranquil answer. "I've ridden twenty miles, and I don't feel like doing any more. I'll get down. Miss Temple and I have met before. Tell them I'm here, if you don't mind."

Miss Brunt drew herself up, at the same time glancing sideways at Kirk Troy, who stood at the inner door, with his cocked rifle.

"No, Mike Alison, for that's who you are, and I know you well. I will not tell them young girls that you're come. And I ken tell *yew* straight, I think you've got blasted impidence even to ask me. That I *dew*!"

Mike made no reply to this delicate hint. He was dismounting at the moment, and now turned his back upon the house-keeper, and led his horse to the hitching post at the corner of the house. Securing Leone there, Mike strolled back in a leisurely manner. Miss Brunt was still in the doorway, watching him with a defiant but anxious eye.

"And what do you want now?" she said shortly, as he came up.

"I wish to know," he said, "whether you are going to tell Miss Temple that I'm here; or whether I must announce myself?"

"Neither the one nor the other," was the emphatic rejoinder. "Kirk, let fly if he makes the slightest move forward. Now, Mike Alison, no fooling. Just git!"

At these words Mike's face, which up to this moment had been wearing a quiet, amused smile, changed. This was somewhat more than a joke. His brows contracted and his teeth slowly closed upon

his moustache, and though for several seconds he stood perfectly still, the intrepid spinster, to use her own expression, "felt shivers run up and down her back like water snakes."

"I am sorry to be impolite to a lady," said he at last, stepping forward, and putting Miss Brunt aside with as much ease and gentleness as if she had been a baby, "but this kind of thing gets monotonous, after a while."

He came now face to face with Kirk. The idiot's rifle was at the shoulder, and for a fractional part of a second, Mike's fingers went in search of his revolver, and Kirk's life hung by a hair. But better feelings gained the day, and he only said sternly :

"Put that down. Don't try to frighten me. You know perfectly well that you could not hit me if you fired. Your hand is trembling."

The men looked at each other fixedly. Kirk had brought himself fully to the pitch of shooting anybody or anything, if

they had to push past him and open the parlour door; but this man did not push. He simply glared at him with terrible shining eyes, and, under his look, Kirk felt himself losing all heart and power.

"Put that down," said Mike again, now slowly approaching the idiot, step by step. Kirk sighed twice, wavered, cast an imploring look at Sarah Brunt, as if wishing she would take his place, and then slowly lowered the muzzle of his weapon, and stood still and helpless, to Sarah's intense disgust, while Mike walked steadily past him, and laid his hand on the lock of the parlour door.

An hour later Jack and I arrived from town. We were surprised to see Sarah running out to meet us, and spurred forward sharply.

"What's the matter?"

"The Devil," was the breathless reply. "He's here. Nothing short. It is Mike Alison himself. He has been alone in the settin'-room for I dunno know how long with Nep and Laura, and there's that

blamed idiot cuss as foolish as he's high a squattin' on the door-step with a shot gun, and a sayin' he'll have Mike's blood when he comes out, yet without spunk enough to go in and take it there and then like a man and a Christian. And here am I, a worritin' myself to death, for fear that gun should go off in his great clumsy hands and hit the wrong person; and because I can't tell what's happening inside, and yet dursn't peep in and see. For goodness sake, hurry up, boys, or they'll be all murdered before ye get there."

We did as we were told promptly, and Jack's face was as white as the redness of his complexion would permit by the time we swung off our horses and made for the parlour. There was Kirk, as Sarah had described, crouching on the step, hugging a shot-gun, with long and anxious countenance, an unpleasant glitter in his eyes. We walked past him quickly and opened the door. What Jack expected to see I know not; but I never saw a man look

more foolish than he, as with a cocked revolver in his hand, he stepped in and saw the girls at the piano in the act of beginning a duet. Beside them, and placing the music-book in position, was Mike Alison.

“I have not heard this piece for ten years,” he was saying, “and it was thought old-fashioned then, I remember ; but I used to consider it one of the prettiest ever written. Such duets as this do not seem to be composed nowadays.”

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT DO YOU HERE?

THE Western man has many qualities peculiar to himself, but none so characteristic as a power of keeping his countenance, and retaining self-possession, under the most trying circumstances. Thus, when Jack opened the parlour door with blood-thirsty intent, and found there a polite and sociable party engaged in the innocent occupation already mentioned, though he inwardly felt, as he confided to Nep afterwards, "as mean as a squashed snail;" yet, after one whispered exclamation, and a nonplussed glance, he dropped his revolver into its holster, as if it were out by the merest accident, and greeted the visitor in the pleasantest manner imaginable, as though his presence was no surprise at all.

"And how have you been amusing yourself this afternoon, Mike? I hope they made you welcome."

"We did our best," said Laura innocently, while Sarah put down the dish she was carrying with a prodigious bang, and hastily left the room.

"Mr. Alison has been refreshing his memory of home by looking at photographs of English people. I hope he did not find it very dull?"

There was a curious questioning tone in Laura's voice; and glancing at her I noticed that her eyes were bright and her cheeks a little flushed. Mike, also, turned his head away before he replied slowly with the same refined tone and accent I had heard once before.

"Yes, Miss Temple was kind enough to introduce me to all the members of her family in succession. It was very interesting. And it certainly did remind me of old times."

He spoke in carefully measured tones, which brought back to me the evening at

camp, when I had told him Laura's name. I stretched my hand over the back of her chair to a little table where the family album stood, and without speaking began to turn the pages carelessly, watching Mike out of the corner of my eyes. There was a photograph of myself when a boy, one of Laura's father and mother, and then a likeness of her elder sister, married to an old college tutor of mine. Laura now laid her hand upon the book and smiled :

“ Mr. Alison was so anxious to know who this could be, that I formally accused him of knowing Adelaide. But he denied it. Did you not, Mr. Alison ? ”

He was looking at me fully, the lamp Sarah had just placed on the table shining brightly on his face. I noticed for the first time that in spite of bright keen eyes, and a fierce mouth, the prevailing expression of his face was sadness, the sadness of a man in constant pain. But his voice was perfectly composed as he replied slowly :

"I do not think any one could fail to be struck with such a face as that, if it were only from its likeness to your own, Miss Temple."

"Indeed! But Adelaide is ever so much handsomer than I am," said Laura, looking pleased, "though it is true that when this was taken she was about my age. And what think you of the photo opposite?"

"Your sister's husband?"

"Yes. A splendid face, is it not?"

"I am not much of a judge."

He bent his head nearer to the book, as if to examine the photo closely, but following the direction of his eyes I saw that they were fixed upon the likeness of the girl. Then he turned the page and looked up at Laura, and again I saw that hungry, longing glance which had awakened Jake's distrust a few weeks ago. It was very strange.

Before supper was ready we had three additions to our party, for Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple, when returning from their daily excursion, had run across the

Sheriff, and, while the album still lay open before me, I heard his deep voice in the kitchen greeting Sarah Brunt. A minute later he came in, giving a perceptible start when he saw Mike Alison, smiling at the same time with a peculiar grimness.

"Yes," he answered Jack's greeting. "I was uncertain about coming, thinking that p'raps I'd be in the way; but now that I find this friend is here, I'm glad I accepted the invite."

He gravely saluted Mike, and I saw the two men look at each other long and steadily.

When supper was over the company broke up into pairs, Mike Alison and Mr. Gillespie lighting cigars and strolling off to the stables, Jake Blundell and Mr. Temple mixing their toddy and drawing up to the fire. The girls were in high spirits. It was evident that the favourable impression they had formed of Mike Alison a few weeks ago had been strengthened by their experience of the afternoon.

The next day we took our visitor to the new ranche. Jack was busy and could not come, though Nep went with us; but Kirk Troy saddled his horse, uninvited, and rode behind Laura with a clouded brow.

The unfortunate man was in a restless and excitable state. From the time when I had taken his gun from him the day before, with a sharp reminder that he must not meditate murder of my friends, he had offered no open hostility to Mike. But it was evident that he neither loved nor trusted him. He would never leave Laura now, under any pretext whatever, if he could help it.

But there were others beside the idiot to whom the presence of Mike Alison gave the gravest uneasiness. Though neither Jake Blundell nor Jack now said a word against our visitor before me, I found that they held more than one council of war over the matter when I was out of the way. Mr. Temple, of course, was already in their confidence,

and, it must be confessed, sided strongly with them.

"And now there is another thing," said Jake, after going through the old stories of Mike's bloodthirstiness, and the men he had killed, and the company he kept, and the terror which he inspired. "Apart from all these, I have just learned a fact which makes me more than commonly uneasy. All Mike's money—at least, I suppose it was all he had—lay in bank at Trinidad. He's taken it out in a lump. What's he done that for, except that he is meditating some villainy? And what is that villainy? Tell me that! He's foolin' round, I say, with a bad purpose!"

Mr. Temple, remembering the "*mauvais quart d'heure*" in the saloon, groaned, "What could it be?"

Mr. Gillespie, however, who was present on this occasion, went off unexpectedly on quite the opposite tack. He listened to all Jake's arguments to the very end without saying a word. Then he spoke his mind.

“ I can't say that I think you've proved your case at present. Everything you tell me, and lay such stress upon, might be explained just as well the other way. He's foolin' round for a bad purpose, you say—an infernal purpose. Well, he is foolin' round, there's no doubt of that; but why for a bad purpose? Why, he's always looking hard at Miss Laura? Well, so am I, and so are you, and so is every one else who gets a chance, except Jack, who stares at Nep. Why not account for it naturally, and say straight out she's an almighty pretty girl? Then he has not shot any one for a month past, and you say this points to the conclusion that he's bottling up for a good old tear when his plans are matured. Why? It seems to me, now, much more natural to suppose, that the society here has a softening influence upon him, specially that of Harry, whom Mike cares for, I believe, as if he were his brother; and it is said that even Mike Alison's chief pleasure does not lie in plugging friends. Yes, I'm well aware

of what he has done in the way of shootin' Jake ; I know all about it. I understand the pecooliarity of all that money he had at Trinidad being withdrawn in a lump the other day, without a reason being given. But, come to think of it, it is his own ; and we don't all let the world know what our private business is, or will be, And so," concluded Mr. Gillespie, with the ghost of a twinkle in his brown eyes, " it just seems to me, boys, that about the sensiblest thing we can do is to mind our own affairs, and let Harry and Mike mind theirs."

There was another person at Eagle Tail Rancho who was made desperately uncomfortable by the suspicions of Jake Blundell. This was Nep Gillespie.

A week after Mike took up his abode with us, she was riding alone with Jack, and, for the first time in his presence, broached the question of Mike's past life.

" Yes," he had answered drily, " I have no doubt some peculiar things have

happened to him. He is a very peculiar man—more peculiar than pleasant.”

Nep looked at her companion with curiosity. “I think him very pleasant,” she said.

“You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“Indeed? How many times have you met him, then, before he came here?”

“Three or four.”

“So have I. I danced with him once.”

“A great honour!”

“Well, I had a real good time. He was the best partner there.”

Jack was silent a minute. Then he said in the tone of one who has made up his mind upon a difficult question.

“I know nothing about his dancing; but I do know what you do not apparently, that he’s a great scoundrel.”

“But why should we fear him?”

“Why? Can’t you understand that a man without principle, such as he, is never safe? Suppose he wanted to possess something here very badly, what would prevent

him taking it, if he got the chance? I thought that perhaps you might help us. Neither Harry nor Laura will hear a word against the cuss, and believe that he stays here simply because of his friendship with Hal—or some such bosh. Can you enlighten them? They are nothing more than babies, after all, or they would know that one who's killed as many men as Mike Alison during the past five years for the pleasure of killing, can't help going on until he makes a false step some day, and kicks the bucket himself. But, Lord bless you! They go on treating him like an ordinary Christian; trusting him more every day; until I get so wild that I long to draw upon him myself, and end it, though I know how surely it would end me."

Jack paused here, having delivered himself of the longest speech that was ever known to fall from his lips. Nep made no answer for some time. She knew the nature of her companion well. A matter of great urgency alone could draw from

him such a serious and earnest expression of opinion as the foregoing.

Yet her belief in Mike Alison, though shaken, was not by any means destroyed. It was stunned, not killed. After a few minutes' thought she gathered herself together again, and said gravely :

" But, Jack, there are one or two things that I cannot understand if Mike Alison be all you say : if he has done so very many wicked things, why is he allowed to live ? Of course I know what a good shot he is, and all that ; but I also know enough of men in our country to be quite sure that an unmitigated villain would not live long about here."

Jack nodded.

" Yes, that is so ; but don't discount his shooting power, and, more than that, his watchfulness. Three times have cowboys, hankering after the reward offered for Mike's life, slipped into a saloon behind him and waited their chance, and every time he noticed this, and, as the man reached for his deringer, turned and shot

him through the head ; the folk about believing he must have done it for fun, until the dead man's pockets were searched and the guarantee form found. However, it is a fact that he is not to be classed with such out-and-out ruffians as Blossie and Worrall. If he rides away with your horses one day, he may shoot your deadliest enemy the next. Indeed, it is an open secret that it pays Jake Blundell far better to wink at his raids and to reap the benefit of his fondness for blood, than to hunt him down. But it's playing with a wild beast who may at any moment take the wrong side."

"I see," said the girl, thoughtfully. "But there is another thing. What is your notion of Mike's intentions in the present instance? Do you think that he has very bad ones in his mind, or that it is merely a kind of playing with fire to encourage him to feel at home here?"

"I think his intentions are bad," said Jack, briefly. "Jake is obtaining private information from a very sure source, which,

if proved, as it must be soon, will show that he is deliberately working out a scheme of a very infernal nature. You see, Mike is not a common rascal at all. In his way he is a genius, therefore he will not make rough and clumsy plans. With all his recklessness, he has a huge amount of self-control. To show how serious the Sheriff believes the case to be, I may tell you in confidence that he is already in communication with the Governor about a quick supply of troops in case of need. But we won't go into this, and mind you don't say a word about the troops to a soul."

"Of course not," she replied, and then they rode in silence for some time. But in Nep's active mind an idea now began to form, which became more distinct and substantial every minute. At last she said earnestly :

"I suppose I may not know exactly what you accuse Mike Alison of intending to do?"

"No," was the emphatic answer. "I

make no definite accusation against the man at all—yet.”

“Then you don’t know why he is here; you only suspect the reason?”

“Exactly.”

“I understand,” said the girl, very slowly; “I understand. I presume now,” she went on, in the hesitating tone of one who fears being accused of saying something very foolish, “that no one has asked him the question point-blank. Laugh at me, if you please; but I should like to know.”

Jack bit his lip, but he did not laugh.

“Certainly not. It would be more than any man’s life was worth if Mike took offence.”

Nep smiled.

“I would ask him, without hesitation, if I thought it would do any good. Oh, I am not afraid of him,” she added, laughing gaily. “And here we are at home again. Come, let us race to the stable; I am sure my Netty is faster than your Antonio—*vamos, amigo.*”

Jack sighed. He would have preferred to go very slowly, and unburden his soul of something which during the past six months had oppressed it strangely; but Nep's word was law, and he was never very ready of speech, so he missed his opportunity, and they galloped home.

Two weeks passed by. Mr. Gillespie returned to business, and Jake Blundell accompanied him. But Mike Alison showed no sign of leaving; on the contrary, making himself quite at home, and apparently throwing himself heart and soul into the arrangements of furniture and the fitting up of the new ranche. In this he gave most valuable assistance, having a pair of hands which seemed capable of constructing anything.

One morning Mike surprised me greatly by saying that he should be unable to put the finishing touches to the last of the bookshelves, at which he was working, until the following day, as he was going to escort Miss Gillespie to town. I wished him a pleasant ride, and wondered what

Jack would think of this freak. He did not, however, seem at all disturbed when I informed him of the fact. It was evident that he expected it.

So the black mare, Netty, and the buckskin horse, Leone, with their respective owners, loped briskly away, side by side, when breakfast was over. It was past sundown when they returned. We looked at Nep curiously. She was still grave and thoughtful, but talked more freely than had been the case for the past few days. The mantle of her former silence, however, seemed to have fallen upon Mike Alison. The old expression of intense watchfulness, which had been far less noticeable lately than in former days, had now returned. He constantly glanced at Jack with a restless, questioning look, and the familiar curtness of speech and manner gradually superseded his newly-acquired refined and gentle tone.

The girl had made up her mind to put that question to Mike, of which she had spoken in a tentative manner to Jack. It

required rare courage, however; and thinking over all the people I know, or ever have known, I can remember no one but Nep who would have done such a thing.

"Mr. Alison," she said at last, "I asked you to kindly ride with me to-day, because I thought it right to say something to you, which I—which I felt should be said, both for your own sake, and for that of very dear friends of mine."

She stopped a moment here to steady her nerves and shape her words in the best possible way. Her companion bowed, and turning slightly towards her, replied gravely :

"Please speak out, Miss Gillespie."

"Thank you, I will."

Here the girl raised her flushed face and looked steadily at him.

"I am going to ask you a question which will seem very impertinent.. What I want to know is this : Why have you, a man who, I am told, has never spent two consecutive weeks at one house for five

years past, taken up your abode so quietly and resolutely at Eagle Tail Rancho?"

Nep stopped to get her breath—somehow she seemed to have very little about her at this moment—and watched the effect of her words anxiously. She expected Mike to frown, start, exclaim; to do anything, in fact, but what he did, which was to turn slowly away from her steadfast look, and shake his head, with a smile, half sad, half bitter.

"You are very angry?" she said quickly, as he did not speak.

"I am a bit sorry," was the quiet reply. "I am a bit surprised, but not angry—at least, not with you."

"You will answer my question then?"

"That is another matter. Are you quite sure that you had a right to ask it?"

Nep blushed hotly. Then she remembered Jack's words, and recovered herself.

"I said that it would seem impertinent. I see you think it so. But please answer my question."

Mike stroked his horse's mane reflectively.

"So," he said slowly, talking to himself more than to her, "so the folk are on the jump about me, eh? And you want to know why a murderer, a man whose hands are dyed with blood—oh! I know—a man like me obtrudes his presence upon respectable ranche folk? Truly, Miss Nep, it is a difficult nut to crack, a nut with a nasty taste; and, what's more, I fear that I must leave you and your friends to break your teeth over it just at present. But I will answer your question.

"I came here because Harry Thornton invited me; I stay because he wishes me to do so; and as long as this is so, I shall continue to stay if I see fit, because, for the first time for five years, I have an object in my life. This is all I can tell you. Is there any other question you would like to ask?"

"No, thank you."

And nothing more was said by either until they reached the town. Nep had

cast her die, and lost. She was no wiser than when she left Eagle Tail Rancho.

A few days after this, when Mike, Laura, and myself were returning from the new rancho, having put the last completing touch, a horseman galloped up and greeted Mike. I had seen the man before; it was he who had told the tale of Laura's capture, and Pete Worrall's discomfiture, before the bar of Menke's saloon. While they were talking, Jack strolled up on foot, for we were close to home, and I noticed that he looked upon the conversing horsemen with a particularly benevolent smile.

Presently Mike wheeled and rode up to us; he was grim and anxious, and said hurriedly:

"I am sorry, friends, but I must be at Cimarron to-night. I've urgent business there." He gripped my hand. "Good-bye, Harry. I'm glad I've seen all the house-fixings through before I went. I shall run down on the twenty-ninth, to be in plenty of time for the wedding. Good-

bye, Miss Temple." And with a wave of his hat he dashed off at a speed with which the horse of the cowboy, who accompanied him, had considerable difficulty in keeping pace.

"Ay, ay," growled Jack, as he watched the swiftly retreating figures. "He's quite right, and so was Jake. We have not seen the last of him yet, confound him!"

CHAPTER IX

A FISH OUT OF WATER

THE eighteenth of December was the day fixed by the Reverend Jonathan Chapin for his arrival at Eagle Tail Rancho, a week before the wedding. It had not been thought that he would appear upon the scene of action so early, but he returned from the East sooner than we had expected.

The reverend gentleman was due at noon, but it was nearly sundown before Kirk Troy, who was chopping firewood, reported that "a cuss on a burro was makin' for the rancho sry-like," and we knew that our man was here.

Jack and myself at once adjourned to the porch. On the slope of prairie to the northward some one was approaching

mounted on a donkey of patient aspect. It was a black donkey, of large, strong frame, much heavier in build, and longer in limb than the English ass; yet its master's feet were within a few inches of the ground, and at times it was an open question whether they did not actually touch it.

The ranchemen about Cimmarron indulged in many candid expressions of opinion concerning the Reverend Jonathan and his burro. Mr. Gillespie asked him more than once whether a religious man of twelve stone ought to ride a donkey at all, if he did not make a practice of carrying it himself for a part of every journey.

A curious and striking spectacle did the reverend gentleman present as he came towards us. Upon his head was a narrow-brimmed "wash-basin" hat, tied closely round with a capacious red woollen scarf, to protect his ears from the cold. He wore a long dark ulster, so disposed as to cover nearly the whole of his donkey as well as

himself, and from beneath this garment his feet appeared conspicuously, being held at right angles to his burro's sides, with gently-elevated toes.

When Mr. Chapin reached the house he solemnly introduced himself, and shook hands. Then he dismounted with as much dignity as if his donkey were a thoroughbred, and, giving the reins into my hands, remarked graciously :

"I should be much obliged, young man, if you would place this beast in your stable, and fodder him well. I have ridden him from Stockton this afternoon, and he is weary."

After which he promptly made his way past Jack up to the kitchen fire.

I looked after the man with an astonishment and disgust too great for words. Of all the cool things that any one can do on the frontier, none is so cool as to ask a stranger to attend to his horse. It is nearly as great an insult as it would be in the East to expect a white woman to clean his boots.

When I returned to the ranche I found the traveller basking before the parlour fire, and making himself very much at home. His long limbs were reposing at full length across the hearth, and he was smiling at some remark of Nep's with superb condescension.

The Reverend Jonathan Chapin was a thin man, with high cheek-bones, a very long nose, and rather small eyes, which he had a habit of half closing when making a remark of any length, and giving his listeners a strong impression that he was repeating a lesson well learnt by heart. This mannerism was rendered the more conspicuous by a slow and deliberate utterance, and a voice with a strong nasal twang. He was clean shaven, and had dark, straight hair, worn rather long, and parted in the middle. In dress, Mr. Chapin was strictly clerical, and it is not to be denied that his spotless white tie and long black coat gave the place a civilised and respectable appearance, and made the flannel shirts and buckskin garments

worn by Jack and myself look extremely rough and uncouth.

Supper was now served, and after the meal, warmed with good coffee and mutton cutlets, Mr. Chapin became mildly talkative.

His remarks, like those of many other men, were principally about himself and his work. He gave us interesting reminiscences of efforts to plant knowledge of true religion in the darkened minds of Western men, which did not seem to have been very successful as a rule; but Mr. Chapin was very complacent about the size of his congregation.

"I pay frequent visits, you see," he said, "to my neighbours. It is this which answers so well.

"Once I thought I would try preaching in the saloon—yes, in the saloon itself—at the new town of Otero, at night. For this purpose I specially prepared a course of three sermons upon the besetting sins of settlers in the country. The first, dealing with want of respect for sacred things, and

expressed in language as clear and strong as I could command ; the second, touching upon the widespread use of bad language—a continuation practically of the one before ; and the third, warning my misguided friends of the retribution inevitably in store, if they continued in their wicked uncharitableness towards the Red man."

"This was very brave of you," said Nep.

"Well," he replied with a modest sigh, "I was told—warned by your father, Miss Neptuna—that the risk was great ; but I felt that my duty was too clear to be mistaken : so I went in one evening when I knew the place was full. Yet, after all"—here Mr. Chapin sighed again, and continued with sad, impressive dignity—"I fear that my words only touched the hearts of very few. I had high hopes at first, for as I gave out my text, with a few introductory remarks, the card-playing stopped, and even the whisky-drinkers put down their glasses. Before I had gone far, however, a very extraordinary thing happened. The men left the place. They did not go

all together, but disappeared one by one until, when the moment arrived to make an appeal to their better nature, there was only the bar-keeper left. Yes," Mr. Chapin went on in a slow and meditative tone, while a preternatural silence reigned in the room, "I do not remember ever being more surprised at anything in my life. I even stopped speaking, a thing which under no circumstances have I done before, and looked questioningly at the bar-keeper. He was a Christian man, and had been to the church more than once. 'James,' I said, 'what does this mean?' 'Sir,' he answered, 'you've been too much for 'em.' 'I don't understand,' I said, bewildered still. 'It's clearer than daylight,' he replied, 'the boys are taken slick aback'—I repeat his own words—'pulled off their feet. They've never been spoke at before. Why, they're sensitive as girls, if you only knew it. Can't stand them words of yours, any more'n a cat can boiling water. Didn't you tell 'em the Lord would reckon wi' their sins hot, when He cotched them—or

words to that effect? Well—then, what can you expect? I tell you, parson, the boys didn't know the Lord had heerd of Otero yet! Why, the railway depôt's only been built six weeks!' I was shocked, as you may well think, but after a little further talk I went away, feeling that my friend was right. I have not been there again, but I shall go, and—and on the next occasion I shall be more gentle in my manner. It was a curious experience, was it not, sir?" turning to Mr. Temple, who, struggling with internal convulsions, only nodded in reply.

"Since then," continued Mr. Chapin, "I have confined myself to visiting the surrounding ranches: I find this answers well."

"What an untold blessing it must be to the ranche-folk!" said Jack, pensively.

"Yes," replied Mr. Chapin, in a dry tone, "they *dew* seem to appreciate the visits. I make a rule of calling in the week, and spending an evening with them, if I don't see them at church on the pre-

vious Sunday, and you wouldn't believe, sir," addressing Mr. Temple with a quiet smile, "how reg'lar their attendance becomes after that."

"I can understand it—quite!" said the old gentleman, testily, for his nerves were beginning to suffer from the continuance of Mr. Chapin's eloquence.

I think it was the day after the pastor arrived that Jack and Nep became engaged. They went out for a ride together, and did not return until late. As I opened the door, Nep ran by me with peculiar swiftness, and then Jack's voice came out of the darkness, with a husky tremble in it I had never heard before.

"Harry, old boy, come here and shake hands. Congratulate me, lad. We're engaged."

There was a general jubilation that evening. Two of the precious bottles of champagne were drawn from the cellar—for Mr. Gillespie had returned with the young people—and healths were drunk and songs

sung, until even Mr. Chapin brightened up, and volunteered to sing a ballad, which a friend of his had composed. It was a beautiful love song, supposed, I believe, to express the pangs of a broken-hearted and forsaken lover, and was applauded by us to the echo. But as the singer had forgotten most of the words, and was not at all sure of the tune, we did not ask for an encore.

In the very midst of this jollity the dogs barked and we heard a halloo. Jack promptly threw open the door, and went out, hospitality beaming all over his face. When he returned, he was very much sobered down.

"It is Mike Alison," he said quietly, resuming his seat by Nep. "See to him, will you, Harry?"

I sallied forth now and found my friend at the stable. He smiled when I told him the news.

"Well," he said, "I shall be intruding on a family party, and I will not come in to-night. Give my excuses. I have

blankets here, and I had my supper at Stockton."

"What nonsense," I replied contemptuously. "Come in, man, at once."

Yet I could not help thinking of Jack's face when he told us who was here. Things turned out, however, very differently from what I expected. Even Jack acknowledged afterwards that the rest of the evening could not have been merrier than it was. Mike Alison seemed to have cast his skin. His grimness and taciturnity had disappeared. He set the girls down to the piano, and made them play everything they knew; and when they rose at last, he astonished us all by taking their place with a laughing apology, and after a few false starts, singing an old English hunting song in a rich baritone, and playing his own accompaniment.

"Oh, if Jake Blundell were only here to see!" said Laura, as we frantically applauded the performance, and asked for more. "But, Harry," she now whispered, excitedly, as Mike began a plaintive love

ditty, "I have heard that voice before, I know I have. Oh, where could it have been? It seems to bring back old days! Yet I cannot—I cannot remember when!" And though Laura thought over it all the evening, she never came nearer to a solution of the problem.

The only person who thoroughly disapproved of the appearance of Mike Alison was the Reverend Jonathan Chapin. Jack declared that he looked upon Mike as if he were Satan in person. A collision between them was inevitable, and came at last one evening at supper.

During the day the reverend gentleman had been greatly exercised in his mind, for Jack had gravely and emphatically told him that it was his duty to say something to Mike about his manifold sins; and Mr. Chapin, though perfectly ready for the work, was in great doubt as to what kind of holy water would have most effect upon the fiend. At last he decided upon the brand, and as we sat down to our evening meal, he began his attack.

"There is one custom, sir, which I find very rife among certain classes in this country, and upon which I should like a candid opinion from you. I allude to the frequent shooting of human beings that goes on in these saloons and gambling-dens. I suppose there is no means of stopping this horrible practice?"

"There's one which might be tried," was the answer. "Fine the saloon-keeper five dollars every time he sells adulterated whisky."

"And what would be the effect of this restriction?"

"To keep men's brains cool, and prevent them from going mad after a single cock-tail. Do you know what firewater is like, sir?"

"No, I do not," said Mr. Chapin, with marked emphasis. "I do not. But I fear that it is the men whose brains are clearest, who do most of the shooting."

Mike Alison bent his eyes on his questioner with a look of great curiosity.

"You're right," he replied. "But those

men generally have a good reason for shooting—I speak from personal experience.”

Mr. Chapin bowed.

“Yes, yes, I see. You defend this practice by intimating that those who are killed deserve their fate. This is a terrible doctrine, my friend ; a fearful thing to say. However, I will waive this question for the moment. But there is another. Sir!”—and here Mr. Chapin laid down knife and fork and accentuated each word by striking the palm of his left hand with his right forefinger—“there is one thing which cannot be defended, even by you. Granted that it be justifiable to kill a man under any pretext whatever—though Heaven forbid that I should grant it ! even for the sake of argument—but passing that, I say it is not justifiable, from any point of view, to cause the agony, the long lingering suffering, which must be the lot of these wounded, in these affrays, but not quite until death.”

We all looked at Mike. He was

thoughtfully rolling a bit of bread between his fingers and thumb, and staring placidly at his questioner.

"I quite agree with you," was his unexpected answer. "Your remarks are very just, and do you credit. Only, I may say, that if you wish to take me to task with them, you have got the wrong lamb by the tail. They don't apply."

"But am I not right in supposing you to have been frequently connected with such matters?"

"Certainly. I have seen many a man fall," said Mike, calmly. "But, Mr. Chapin"—here he paused to sip his coffee—"I have never wounded a man in my life."

His words were pronounced with a marked deliberation and distinctness; their meaning was obvious. The Reverend Jonathan said no more.

CHAPTER X

THE REASON WHY

It was the evening before my marriage-day ; a quiet, peaceful time, which will stand out in my memory with peculiar distinctness to the last moment of my life.

Every arrangement for the morrow had been made, and all Laura and I had to think of was how to make ourselves as agreeable as possible to our friends. For the last time our large family party gathered round the supper-table at Eagle Tail Ranche.

What fun we had when supper was over, disputing as to who should wash up the things ; for Sarah Brunt was away at the new ranche, to receive us on the morrow. The peals of laughter there were all round the table when Mr. Temple announced

that it was his turn, and gravely offered to wipe if Mr. Gillespie would wash. Then, in the midst of it Mike Alison, without a word, suddenly bore away the meat-dish and coffee-pot to the kitchen, and had to be waylaid on his return by Jack and myself and held prisoner by force; and finally how the discussion was settled by the tossing of a five-cent piece, dexterously manipulated by Mike, and which resulted in Nep and Jack being chosen for the office.

I was watching Mike's face in a lazy manner, remarking the change in its expression since I had seen it first. The wolfish look in his eyes had now disappeared completely, and the forbidding set of the lips, so noticeable when he sat among his gang at his own camp, was rarely to be seen. His face was no longer that of a man with a hand against every one and every one's hand against him; but rather that of a stern, melancholy man, who had lived a life for the past few years which had worn him to the bone.

"Where did you learn to play the piano so well, Mike? You quite took my breath away, last night, when you struck up. Is it really ten years since you were in England?"

"Yes," he answered briefly. "Ten years to-morrow, I believe."

"You remember the exact day when you left the old country, then?"

He replied with a quiet smile.

"It seems queer that I should, doesn't it? I think it's because the old days have been very much in my mind lately. I am among English folk, you see, for the first time for many years."

"Yet you don't like being reminded of your youth?"

The question was rather a rude one, but we all of us forget ourselves at times.

Mike smiled again, with one of his quick glances.

"No, I do not," he said, simply. "It is interesting, but not pleasant. What is pleasant, though," he continued, dreamily, "yet strange, is to find myself sitting in a

ranche like this, among friends, after the life I've lived lately. Do you remember the night at my camp, Harry ? ”

“ Can I ever forget it ? ”

He chuckled drily.

“ By George ! how you wired into us. What was it you said ? A mean miserable—— ”

“ Don't, man ! Let bygones be bygones. ”

“ H'm ! I'm not sure that it's always advisable ; the other part of the saying takes my fancy most. ” He had finished his pipe and was leaning forward in his chair, and as he spoke he laid his hand upon my knee, continuing in a low tone, “ Harry, old man, you may be surprised to hear it, but, do you know, I guess I'm going to follow this idea out for the future. I thought that there was a good deal of truth in what you said that night. ”

I started and caught hold of his arm.

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ What I say. The old business has

rather lost taste lately, and I shall give it up."

"No!" I exclaimed incredulously.

"It's a fact; but don't shake me to pieces"—and he laughed as I wrung his hand with all my might—while Laura paused in her winding with sparkling eyes, and waited for her turn. "Good resolutions, Miss Temple, are made to be broken, you know. I thought I'd tell you both, though, before to-morrow. It is a sort of left-handed wedding-present. Yes, old man, thanks to you, I have had enough, I think, of the old life."

This was news, indeed; almost too good to be true. But Mike did not give us time to express our feelings on the matter. For he now wheeled round abruptly, and addressed Mr. Gillespie.

"Did you ever know or hear of such a mild winter as this, sir?"

"Never," said the storekeeper, emphatically. "Not a fall of snow yet. We shall pay for it in spring, I dessay."

"Very probably. You've not heard

any news of the Apaches lately, I suppose?"

"Not I. It's not often you do this time of year. A tidy scare we had in the summer, though. I thought we'd have trouble more than once. But we scraped through without any, except for what happened to you. He's a 'cute cuss, that chief they have now—Black Scalp—and knows the country well, it is said. It's a comfort to think that the Redskins have reservations to go back to in the winter."

"H'm!" grunted Mike, drily. "I suppose they are in their reservations."

Mr. Gillespie laughed.

"Well, everything is possible in this country. Perhaps they've gone to Washington, and thrown themselves on the charity of the Quakers. I wish they would. Poor brutes! they've a hard time in winter. I think I'd rather be a nigger than an Indian."

"They take it out of the White man, though," said Mike, bitterly, "when they get to him."

Mr. Gillespie nodded.

"That is so. I hear two hundred families were massacred by Black Scalp in the Southern counties this summer."

"How dreadful!" said Laura, shuddering. "Are the women and children killed as well, then?"

"All," said Mike. "The men first, because they are troublesome; then the helpless ones. There is your poor Red man, Mr. Chapin!"

"Well, come, now," said Mr. Gillespie, mildly, "they have a poor time enough when they are dropped on by whites. How many would you calc'late to leave alive, Mike, if you came across Black Scalp and his braves?"

"Not one boy," was the curt reply, "after what happened down South. Please to remember that I am not an officer in the United States Army. It would not be to my advantage to be always twenty-four hours' march behind the Redskins, as it was to a certain general we know of. The rank and file were not to blame last sum-

mer down South ; it was their officers, who even refused to supply ammunition to the settlers when they had corralled Black Scalp. What sort of time would you have had in this county last summer if you had accepted the offer of troops, instead of taking the business in hand yourselves, and preparing quietly for the Indians to make a start? There is only one thing which will enable the army in this country to retrieve their honour. Put their general over a slow fire for five minutes, and threaten to repeat the punishment in as many weeks if he does not do his duty. Black Scalp would then be swept off the face of the earth in a fortnight."

Mr. Gillespie shrugged his shoulders, and flipped the ash off his cigar.

"It's quite true," he said, briefly.

"Then is this settlement in danger of Indian raids?" said Mr. Temple, questioningly.

"Not now," replied the storekeeper, with much promptness. "The railway will be at Stockton in March, and the

place settled up wonderfully by June. But last summer and fall it was a near thing."

"They do not attack in winter, then?"

Mr. Gillespie shook his head, and smiled with the compassion of a Western man for an ignorant tender-foot.

"No, sir. Apaches live in tents, and, when on the war-path, in the open air. The climate three hundred miles to the south-west suits 'em better than ours at this time of year. And there they will be now, starving along as best they may, poor cusses, upon what Government allows them, and the proceeds of a little hunting. Ain't that the case, Mike?"

"It is their usual practice," he replied evasively. "Miss Temple, now that you have finished winding that wool, may we have some music?"

The last skein had now left Kirk's unwilling hands, and Laura obediently folded up her work, and went to the piano. At the sound of playing Nep and Jack

returned from their labours, and we then spent a pleasant social evening. But a tinge of sadness ran through it all. Mr. Temple was to leave for England very shortly, so that this would be nearly the last we should spend together.

At ten o'clock the girls retired. They were scarcely gone when the gruff shout of the Sheriff was heard outside. He had arrived two hours before his time. Jack went out promptly to see after his horse, while Mike and I turned into the kitchen, to fry mutton-chops and open a bottle of brandy, for a night ride at that time of year was no joke, and the man must be half frozen. To our surprise Jake did not appear until our preparations were almost completed. At last we heard the door slam, and his deep voice greeting Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple. When he came in I saw at once that something serious had happened. He was standing near the fire warming his hands, the other men looking at him in silence. The Sheriff made no movement when he heard

our steps, merely growling out a "good evening" in the grumpiest of tones. I looked at the others for explanation with raised eyebrows, some instinct warned me that it would not be well to ask Jake point-blank what was the matter. But there was no satisfaction to be obtained from the surrounding faces. Jack's was as grim as Jake Blundell's own; Mr. Temple's bewildered; Mr. Gillespie's half amused. Kirk's threw the most light on the question, for it was very white as if with fear, his mouth was slightly open, and his large eyes were fixed intently upon Mike Alison. I followed them, and then started, for Mike was standing straight and stiff, his back against the wall, and his face wearing the look which had not been there for many a week. It was his voice which broke the silence now, a curious vibration in its tone that reminded me of the warning he had given to the crowd at Menke's, after the shooting of Worrall and Blossie; yet the words he used had been spoken

every night since his first arrival among us.

“Harry, I’m going to the stable to water Leone, will you have a stroll round before turning in?”

I was about to acquiescé readily, when Jake kicked the pine log close to his foot and shook his head. It might have been an accidental movement, but I did not take it to be so.

“Thanks,” I replied, yawning, “I guess I won’t to-night.”

Mike nodded, as though he expected the answer, and moved slowly towards the door, his eyes bent upon the ground. As he turned the handle, he threw his head back in the old defiant way and looked at Jake Blundell with a watchful, questioning glance. It was curious to note how the look was met by the group near the fire. Mr. Gillespie nodded pleasantly and said “good night”—Mr. Temple also. Jack and the Sheriff neither moved nor spoke, but met Mike’s eyes with a steady glare, which caused his heavy brows to draw

down into the straight line, and his jaws to stiffen, until any one who had only seen his face but a few hours before would have now almost failed to recognise it. "Good night, gentlemen," he said simply, passing out, and closing the door behind him sharply.

The Sheriff drew a deep breath, and marched into the kitchen. "Of all the brazen-faced devils I ever saw," he muttered between his teeth as he went on, "that man is the worst." He would say no more until his hunger was satisfied. When he had finished everything on the table, and drunk enough brandy to have killed some men, Jake drew his chair round, and looked keenly at me.

"A few weeks ago, young man, I made some remarks about the cuss just gone out which you did not like the taste of. Since, I have not touched on the subject with you, 'cos a man who only suspects, and ain't believed, had better say naught, till he kin prove his words. As I'm in a position to do that now, I bring the con-

cern before you again; and here's things as they stand at this moment:

"Listen to this, then. A mile to the east of Stockton, away up in the Sugareet Cañon, are camped near upon a hundred men. They're well mounted, and well armed, and as they're mostly Texans, are as rough a crowd as were ever seen. These boys have been collectin' in this locality for some weeks past, but as it has only been gradually, one by one, they only reached their full strength a day or two ago.

"Now, Mr. Gillespie, and all of ye, what do a bunch of boys like that want in a settlement, at this time of year, when there's no round-ups of cattle, nor nothing? What will they be after, I say?"

The storekeeper shook his head, and as the Sheriff looked at him as if expecting an answer, he replied gravely:

"Can't say. It's very queer!"

"Ay," said Jake, "so it is—so it is, until you have the key of it in your hand."

"And that is?" said Mr. Gillespie, quickly!

"Mike Alison, sir. It's his money, drawn from the bank the other day, which keeps them boys; it's his business they've collected here to do. Yes, open your eyes, if you will; the proof has come at last of what I said two months and more ago. Here is the leader and chief of them all, the deadliest shot in all this country, the man with five thousand dollars offered for his scalp, at the head of a hundred wild boys, all camped fair and snug in the very heart and core of this settlement."

"What reasons do they give for being there?" interposed Mr. Gillespie, in a hard, cold voice; "they must have some."

Jack chuckled sarcastically.

"Oh, you bet! They've as good a one as they could invent, Indians! Yes, though we're just in the new year, and the thermometer's at zero, yet, if you please, there's danger of a raid by Black Scalp, unless he knows there's a standin' army of White

men ready to drop on him ; that's what they say."

"Is that all?"

"All they'll tell me or you, or any one but the man who gave me the first information, and without whom I should have known nothing."

"And who's that?" I said quickly.

"Hermann Menke."

I laughed.

"What! you would take the word of that man? Why, I'd believe Mike Alison's barest statement against the most solemn oath Menke could swear."

"Hold on there," roared Jake, "you don't know what you're talking about. I would not take the word of any man without proof. D'you think I've been idle? I've seen the boys with my own eyes, I've heard them give the reason, just as Menke told me. Besides, that old fox knew me too well to tell lies. It was only because he'd been letting out Mike's little games that he did not get clean busted on the twenty-first of October. He's been watched

ever since—he's being watched now—and none knows so well as he what will happen to him if he has been lying."

"Then what is Mike going to do, in your opinion?"

Jake paused a moment before answering. His face was very grave, and when he spoke it was in a gentle, impressive tone, with none of the violence of his former manner.

"Now, Harry, don't get the idea that this business gives me any pleasure. I'm bound to go through with it to the end, being responsible for the peace of this county, but I don't like abusing a man any more than you do, especially an enemy of mine, such as Mike has been. You ask what he's going to do? He's going to wait until you're settled on El Gato Creek and then he'll play hell with you!"

"But he does not require a hundred men to do that."

"Yes, because if he'd much less, I'd be on to him, and he knows I've been watching him all along. With a hundred boys he's safe. I can't get near a crowd like

that without troops, and I can't send for troops till I've proved some devilment's been done."

I shrugged my shoulders incredulously. But I began to feel cold and numb about the heart, for I could see by the ominous gloom of Mr. Gillespie's face, that his faith in Mike had gone at last, and he had been such a steady friend to him before.

"I can't see that you could stop the sacking of our ranche, by him, and half a dozen men, if he had kept quiet. Had he not made such a parade of force you would have suspected little."

"Would I not? Do you remember what I said after seein' him at Menke's? Pshaw! he doesn't take me to be such a fool. You're right about one thing, though. He would hardly have made such a buzz about one ranche. But the information I have says that yours would be the first of a large number already marked; that there's a raid projected by Mike, such as we've never seen before. Mind! There never has been, in my twenty years ex-

perience of Frontier life, a desperado whipping round quite like Mike Alison, with his power of shooting, and his temper, which makes him fight like fifty demons rolled into one, and seems to carry him through a scrimmage unscratched, where you or I would be plugged a score of times.

"The truth is, he's a devil. No more, no less, and he must be dealt with as such. Look at his face as he went out just now, was there ever a wickeder pair of eyes in the world? Yet, I'll warrant he's been as sleek and soft as a tabby-cat all day with the girls. However, boys, there's one thing quite sure. If we can't break his bank this time, it'll be a pity. Eh, Jack?"

"We'll try," was the grim answer. "Are you convinced yet, Harry?"

I shook my head.

"But you think it looks bad?"

I would have given my head to have answered "No." But I could not. After a moment's thought, I said, steadily, "Time will show. Say anything you

please. I would trust Mike before fifty Menkes. But when you talk of breaking him, what do you intend to do?"

"Watch and wait," said Jake curtly.

"There's half a dozen boys of mine in his camp, who'll give notice when a movement is intended. I've already been in communication with the Governor; and Colonel Bonner, Commander at Fort Champion, has orders to supply me with what troops I require at an hour's notice. I can't tell when the first blow will come. It might be to-morrow, though I don't think it. But I'm ready for him. He may show his teeth when he likes. And now, boys, we'll turn in; I guess it's just upon midnight. We mustn't over-sleep ourselves to-morrow morning. One thing more. Not a word to the women—but, hist! there's his step."

Mike now re-entered the room; he went straight to his blankets without a word to any one, though his eyes swept quickly along the line of faces as he passed us. The others, also, with many yawns,

began laying down sheepskins and preparing for bed. I did not follow their example. My brain was in a whirl, and picking up my hat I went outside, scarcely noticing the icy biting wind which met me as I opened the kitchen door. I walked away from the ranche in the direction of the creek. Could Jake's words be true after all? One thing was perfectly clear. Before I believed these statements, I would question Mike myself. As I reached this point in my reflections there was a footstep behind me, and Mike's hand was laid upon my shoulder. He had followed me. He did not speak for a moment, but slipped his arm within mine, and paced beside me. At last he said:

"You're out late to-night."

"Yes."

"The Sheriff have much news?"

"Yes."

"Interesting?"

"Very. Surprising also."

"Indeed. What was it?"

His manner was perfectly quiet and

composed, but I could feel the arm within my own trembling slightly. He was much excited, and had divined the subject of our conversation.

"It was about you," I replied. "It was asked why a hundred men in your pay should be loafing about town doing nothing."

The murder was out. He did not answer at once.

"And who said that they were in my pay?"

"Is it not a fact?"

"Yes."

"Then it does not matter who said so."

"I should like to know, exactly. But never mind. I can find out. Well—anything else?"

"There were conjectures made."

"And what did you think?"

"I—I did not know what to think Mike." I turned upon him with choking voice, for I felt keenly how dear he was to me, and the pain of suspecting him was almost more than I could bear. "Mike,

you must see how bad it looks. Tell me why those boys are there ? ”

“ Have you heard no reason given, then ? ”

“ It is said that you feared an Indian attack. That was all.”

“ Yes, I see. Well—that is all.”

We were standing still now, in the bright moonlight, facing one another. He was smiling slightly, but his brows were still contracted, and gave a bitter, sardonic expression to his face.

“ That is all,” he repeated slowly.

“ Then it is not enough,” I replied, my breath coming short and quick. “ Supposing you are right in what you say about the Indians ; what object have you in protecting this settlement, every man in which, except myself, would rather see you dead than alive ? Another thing is said of you. That the money lying in your name at Trinidad was all withdrawn the other day, and that you are paying these men with it. Is this true ? ”

“ It is true.

"Then—then, what the devil do you mean by it all?" My temper was giving way under the perplexity and distress of the moment.

"You would not believe me if I told you."

"Try, and see."

"No. I'd sooner leave things as they are. Look here, lad"—his dry, caustic tone had changed to one of great earnestness—"if it would make you see things clear right through, I would tell you everything to-night, just as it stands, though to say out what I should have to do, would be a terrible wrench. But I know that it would make matters no better. I could see from your face, just now, after Jake had said his say, that our friendship had broken. I caught you up and questioned you, because a man must always know how he stands. I see the position, and there's no more to say. You asked me to stay for the wedding, and I shall stay. Then—well, we won't meet for awhile. I've been living in a fool's paradise lately, that's all, and I must clear out. The words

I used when you asked my name in Horse Camp months ago, were just the truth, we can never become friends. I've been a desperado for years, whatever I was before, and so I shall remain, I suppose, to the end of my life. You have realised this to-night for the first time, and nothing I could say would bring the old feeling back, so I am not going to try now. Come to bed. Don't look so down, lad. Remember, you are to be married to-morrow."

We returned to the ranche in silence, I felt dazed, stunned, tired-out, unable to think, or fix anything clearly in my mind. But somewhere about me lingered a feeling that no friend I had ever known was so dear to me as this Mike Alison, whatever he was, or might be, and that Jake's indictment was some evil dream or scare, which would disappear when faced boldly in the light of day.

We were none of us quite so early as usual the next morning, and Nep and Kirk Troy were busy preparing breakfast when we appeared. This meal was a

silent one. Mike's old taciturnity had returned in full force, and all questions, even Laura's, received only the curtes answers from him, and I could see that not the slightest movement on the part of Jack or Jake Blundell was unnoticed. It seemed to me that the "watching" was rather on the other side. During the next few hours, however, my thoughts were far enough away from the subject. The wedding was put off until sundown, as the Mexican herders were very anxious to be present. They were allowed to bring the sheep in an hour earlier for the occasion.

There was much to be done, and when all was over, there was only just time to slip away to our respective rooms and dress, to be ready by four o'clock. But the result of the preparations was felt by every one to be satisfactory enough to repay our labours. The service was to be read in the parlour. At the eastern end of this room was a reading-desk of cedar-wood, made by Jack, on which were Mr.

Chapin's Bible and Prayer-Book. The reverend gentlemen was standing behind it at this moment, for he was a punctual man, and it was only five minutes off the hour. The large table had been carried away, and placed in the bachelors' sleeping apartment, and was now decked out with a damask cloth and a fine array of silver and glass.

The rocking chairs and Mr. Temple's arm-chair had also been removed, and in their places were eight plain, wooden chairs, arranged in a semi-circle in front of the parson.

All was ready, even the case of champagne, which was in the pantry, three bottles standing on the shelf—to be opened when the right time came.

The guests now began to collect and take their places; they were in their ordinary dress, though very much brushed up; with well-washed faces, and smooth chins, and boots scrupulously polished. There was Jake Blundell, big and hearty, one mass of burly good humour, and

exchanging sly jokes with Mr. Gillespie. The storekeeper sat between Jake and Kirk Troy, and consequently looked smaller than he had ever looked before ; but he was as merry as could be, and the life of the party. Beyond him sat two Mexicans, José and Miguel Gallegos, the third and youngest brother—for we employed the whole family—being unexpectedly absent. The truth was, that he was only a lad of fifteen, and having spied a lynx just when he should have started for home, had gone off upon a royal cat-hunt, and was not to be looked for until the breakfast was ready, though, as his brothers said, he was sure to be back in time for that.

The clock over the mantel-piece struck four. At this precise moment the door of the ladies' room opened and Laura came out, followed by her bridesmaid, Nep. The girls were dressed very simply, the bride in light grey, and Nep in yellow, trimmed with black. Very bright and happy they both looked ; and Mr. Temple,

who was standing near the door, violated all rules and regulations by heartily kissing them both as they passed him. Then we took our places. I glanced round the room as Mr. Chapin cleared his throat to stop a gentle whispering between the Mexicans. Jack was behind me as best man, blossoming out in a somewhat crinkled suit of blue serge, which had slumbered long in dark drawers, and a wedding-favour made by Nep, a decoration with which every member of the party was provided. Mr. Temple stood near the bride, resplendent in white waistcoat and gold watch-chain, ready to give her away. All the rest were seated except Mike Alison, who had taken up a stand near the window, and was now resting his arm on the sill, looking at Laura.

Mr. Chapin was a good reader, and well aware of the fact, therefore he read very slowly. The attention of all was fixed upon him, and only Jake Blundell heard a light footfall behind, and noticed that Mike Alison had abruptly left the room. With a

step as soft and swift as a cat's, Jake stole from his seat, and, after a glance through the window, took up a position of vantage near the door. He was opposite to Laura, and, in spite of the interest of the moment, she glanced at his face, thereby failing to make a response for which Mr. Chapin was waiting at the moment. He looked from his book in surprise, followed the direction of her glance, and then stopped reading. For now the door opened, and Mike Alison came in with a grey, stern face, and behind him little Juan, the Mexican boy, panting heavily, his comical brown phiz drawn and distorted with terror and excitement. Mike did not see Jake standing behind the door, with his right hand concealed, and, without pausing an instant, strode quickly up to our end of the room, saying, in a firm, quiet voice to Mr. Chapin, "I fear that I must interrupt you, sir. This boy——"

Before he could get further there was a sharp click. Jake Blundell had taken a step forward from the door, and presented

a cocked revolver at his head. The Sheriff gave no warning, used no threat; simply covered his man, and pressed the trigger. But, before the bullet flew, he hastily threw up the muzzle, and lodged his shot in the roof, for Laura, heedless of all risk, had thrown herself before Mike with outstretched arms. The whole thing happened so suddenly that we were utterly taken aback, and knew not what to do or say. I had sufficient sense to follow Laura, and stand between the men, as she exclaimed :

“What does this mean? He shall not be touched until you have given your reason. What can have happened?”

“He knows,” roared Jake, now almost beside himself, yet not daring to raise the revolver again; while Mike stood perfectly still, smiling grimly at his old enemy.

“Yes, I do know,” he said, quietly. “Thank you, Miss Temple.” He took both her hands, and pressed them gently. “But you should not have done this. Let him fire, if he pleases. Jake, will you do

it now, or wait till Juan has told his story?"

Mike motioned, as he spoke, to the little Mexican, who was jabbering excitedly to his elder brother.

Jake grunted, and lowered his pistol.

"Let him speak. But, Mike, if you move one finger towards your belt I'll plug yer, so help me God!"

Mike made no reply, except to say a word in Spanish to Juan, who left his brother and pointed to the south, speaking in a shrill treble:

"Me on mesa just now, and see them coming quick, so quick! They be at ranche in a few minutes—in great numbers—big, big numbers!"

"Who?" shouted Jack, for Juan had paused, as if his news were told.

"Who?"

"Los Indios! Indios Apache!"

CHAPTER XI

THE FORTRESS

BEFORE we can go on, I find that I must describe the house exactly, in order that the nature of the attack upon us, and the siege we endured, may be intelligible.

Everybody will very easily understand that there is no pretence of architecture or of beauty in the ranche house of the West. It is a log-house to begin with, though ours was of somewhat stronger construction than most. It consists of four rooms, opening one out of the other in a straight line, all on the same floor. There is no upper storey. It is a long, oblong building, simple and homely, and its plainness—or ugliness, if you will—is considerably increased by the peculiar construction and texture of the roof. The way the roof is

built is as follows. First, there is a flat surface of matched lumber, that is, boards grooved at the sides, and therefore fitting into one another. These are nailed to great "vegas"—beams of pine—and the whole, which is a solid, flat wooden ceiling, is firmly secured by huge spikes to the log walls. The lumber is then covered over with many waggon-loads of earth spread quite smoothly until the whole length and breadth of the roof are covered to the depth of two feet in the middle, and about six inches at the sides. Upon such a roof as this the rain may pour for days as hard as it pleases here in New Mexico, without making any impression; for the earth, after the first shower, bakes from the heat of the sun into a smooth, impenetrable substance, which, if renewed in parts from time to time, makes a most effective covering—cool in summer, and warm in winter, and the cheapest and most easy to build. It is not, however, so picturesque as the English thatch.

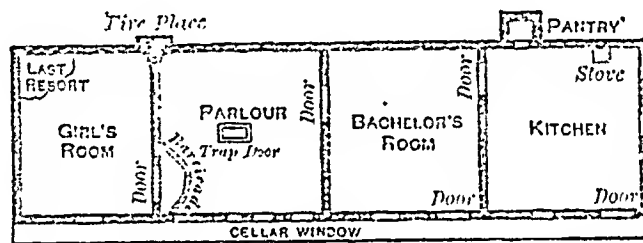
The ranche faced south, all the windows

being on that side. The reason for which was, that, in spring, hurricanes of dust blow from the north, with a force sufficient to break any glass ever made.

I have already said that the rooms opened out of one another. I think the most remarkable feature of our ranche was the number of its doors. Every room but one had an outer door, which opened, like the windows, on the southern side, and there were besides three doors for inter-communication within. The four outer doors opened upon a covered porch or verandah four feet in breadth, and two feet above the level of the ground. This was constructed in order to prevent the place being snow-bound in winter; for though we do not suffer from many falls of snow in Northern New Mexico, they are heavy when they do pay us a visit. Jack took great pride in his doors. He had made them all himself, and no other ranche in the country could boast of such solid pieces of oak, so well put together. The windows, also—of different sizes, from two

to three feet square—had strong frames of the same material, and shutters secured by bolts, the like of which were seldom to be seen in these parts. These were also Jack's workmanship. Whatever he did, he did well.

Eagle Tail Rancho inside was much more imposing than Eagle Tail Rancho outside, though the rooms were furnished



very variously. The one most to the westward, which was reserved solely for the use of the women—the only room with one door—would have compared favourably with the bed-room of any farm-house in the States.

There were iron bedsteads here, with snowy linen, all complete; rocking-chairs, a pretty dressing-table, which the sharpest eye could not have detected to be a packing-case turned bottom upwards, so well

was it covered by the cunning fingers of Sarah Brunt; and upon this dressing-table was the crowning proof of civilisation, a large and handsome looking-glass. The next room, fifteen feet in length, was the parlour, our living room, with tables and chairs, and all the miscellaneous grace of a man living far from towns.

The room next to the parlour was smaller; when you entered it you felt at once that New Mexico was not in the heart of civilisation quite yet. This apartment was the bachelors' bed-room, and was able to accommodate as many people as could crowd into it, being furnished with true frontier simplicity. In one corner was a heap of folded blankets; in another a pile of sheepskins, three wooden chairs—two without backs—and that was all. The floor was of rough unplanned deal. On the walls were a few prints from the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News*; and at one end two shelves, one of which supported an innocent array of old mustard tins and pepper pots, con-

taining gunpowder and shot of all sizes ; the other bore piles of oblong yellow boxes marked with a big red stamp, in which were stored some five hundred rounds of rifle and revolver cartridges. Below these shelves was a spacious rack. Here stood two long Henry repeating rifles ; three Winchester carbines ; and four shot-guns all in good condition, and fully loaded. Our revolvers we carried on our persons.

The fourth and last room was the kitchen, the sanctum of Sarah Brunt. It was furnished now with every culinary convenience the heart of a cook could desire. Until recently the principal articles in it had been a cracked frying-pan, a coffee-pot without a handle, and a tin basin. But times were changed. The "batching" days were over.

Behind the kitchen, on the northern side, was a pantry and larder ; and to the east a rude scullery and wash-house with a tub in lieu of a copper, and a bucket instead of a sink. The larder, also, until the advent of

Miss Brunt, only contained the carcasses of sheep and antelope. But now there were shelves put up, upon which was accumulated a savoury store of good things for the wedding.

Such was Eagle Tail Rancho, a typical log-house of the better class.

But I must not omit an important detail, an original idea of Jack's; though he little imagined, when he worked it out, what a difference it would make on a certain memorable day to all he held dear in the world. This was neither more nor less than a cellar, dug underneath the parlour, and of about the same circumference, which was used as a store-house for goods kept in barrel, such as potatoes and flour; and also, at the present time, for a case of champagne, procured in honour of the coming event, a hogshead and more of genuine whisky, such as no saloon keeper in the territory would dream of selling, and a few bottles of good English brandy. This cellar was a roomy place, cool, yet dry, lit dimly by a small skylight, fitted

neatly in under the porch. It communicated with the upper world by a flight of steps and a trap-door in the centre of the parlour.

With the help of the illustration on page 225 you will understand exactly how we held the fort against our friends the Apache Indians when the time came.

CHAPTER XII

UNWELCOME GUESTS

“Los Indios, Indios Apache.”

We understood Mike Alison. He was more than justified now.

Black Scalp's successful raids down South this year only whetted his taste for the path of war and his thirst for plunder. The unprecedented dryness of the weather enabled his braves to bear the cold of these northern latitudes. With a deep, far-sighted cunning he remained concealed in the mountains until such time as all the cowboys, who collect in summer about the frontier towns, were likely to be scattered far and wide over the country, so as to render it impossible for them to be hastily collected. He had not heard of Mike Alison's men, and expected to find many

an unguarded settlement at his mercy, and, alas for us! Eagle Tail Rancho was the first place struck.

The crisis was so terrible and so unexpected that even strong nerved men, such as Mr. Gillespie, Jake Blundell, and Jack, felt as stunned and helpless as children for the moment; and the rest of us, unable by reason of our ignorance to realise the danger thoroughly, waited for them to act.

What could be done? There was no time to run away, for there were but two horses in the stable, and no defence worthy of the name could be made against the numbers Black Scalp would have with him. After making his first announcement, Juan told us how he saw the Apache scouts when climbing the eastern side of Eagle Tail mesa, and how, having eyes as far-seeing as any Indian of them all, he waited until the main body came in sight, and the direction of their approach became unmistakeable. Then, and not till then, the boy rushed off to the rancho at full speed. The

scouts would be on the hill above the creek in half an hour.

"We're just corralled, boys," says Jake Blundell, slowly and heavily, thrusting his revolver back into his sheath; "unless," with an eager look at Mike, as if not certain, even yet, that he might not have had a hand in this, "unless those boys of yours are already on their way?"

"No," said Mike grimly; "though, had I known the location of the red devils, they would have been at them, you may be sure. But I could not tell where the attack would begin. I only heard that they had left their reservation, and I judged what was going to happen. And even for this——"

He stopped and looked meaningly at the Sheriff.

"I misjudged ye, Mike," exclaimed Jake hoarsely; "I misjudged ye, that's true; Heaven forgive me for it. But there's no time for begging pardons; fewer words the better. You're the only man livin' who can pull us out of such a hole as this.

Will ye help us for the sake of these girls? We'll square accounts and settle the old scores—you and me—another time?"

"Yes;" and Mike held out his hand with a smile. "I'll do my best; I can say no more, if you'll trust me."

Jake gave the hand a mighty wrench.

"I'll prove that when I catch Menke. Oh! the lying, mean——"

"Never mind him now; there's no time. Juan," Mike caught the Mexican lad by the shoulder, "scoot to the stable, you'll find my horse, Leone, saddled ready, ride him to the camp in Sugareet Cañon; ride like greased lightning. Tell the boys there what's happened, and give my name and bring them along. Not a minute to spare! Sabe? Then be off. Quick!" Juan disappeared in a twinkling. Mike turned to Jack. "The boys can be here in two hours if he rides straight. Have you decided what to do meantime?"

"Shut up the place, I suppose, and try to keep the devils off till the boys come up."

"We can nearly all shoot," struck in Nep, "except Laura and Mr. Chapin, and, perhaps, Mr. Temple."

"I will do my best," said the old man cheerfully.

"And there's plenty of ammunition," Nep continued.

"But supposing they set alight to the place. Are your logs fireproof?"

Jack groaned.

"Well, then," said Mike coolly, "I think I've a better plan, if there's time to work it out. Haven't you some whisky below here?"

"Six barrels."

"Enough to stock a saloon. Good! the first thing to do is to get that stuff out. If the Redskins can be started on it in a friendly way, we'd be safe for an hour at least. You going down, Jake? That's right; but where shall it be put? Ah, I have it; across the creek in the herder's cabin. Look alive, boys! Now, Kirk, here's just the job to suit a strong man like you."

It is a fine thing to see some one with well-balanced nerve and ready wit giving orders calmly and cheerily when most men lose their heads ; but in such an extremity as this, the sight was almost divine, and had an extraordinary effect upon all who witnessed it. The entire lack of nervousness or anxiety in Mike's manner, the promptitude with which he grasped the situation, and grappled with it, completely transformed the staring, helpless crowd around him in the space of a few seconds. There was hope in the air ; we had something tangible to do. Our ship, thrown on her beam-ends by a furious gust of wind, had righted herself, and under the firm hand which now seized the helm might weather the storm.

Mike's order was obeyed with as much quickness as could be expected even of men whose only chance for life it seemed. Down the cellar steps rattled the Sheriff, followed by Kirk and the Mexicans ; while Jack tore off to the stable for a rope, and with Mr. Gillespie to help him above,

and the others pushing below, quickly hauled the whisky barrels up to the parlour floor. Meanwhile, Mr. Temple, Laura, and Mr. Chapin were set to make a clearance of all the paraphernalia laid out for the wedding-breakfast—our poor wedding-breakfast!—sweeping everything into the pantry, by Mike's directions.

Only Nep and myself stood idle. Mike beckoned us, and we followed him to the porch and scanned the horizon line to the southward. Though we could see a mile in this direction, there were no signs of Indians at present. We hoped to be safe for fifteen minutes yet, for long as the interval since Juan's first appearance has taken to describe, it was only a quarter of an hour.

"I can't see one thing clear," said Mike, shading his eyes with his hand, and stooping slightly, keeping intent watch for the enemy. "And I asked you to come here, as I thought you might give me an idea. The boys will get the whisky over to the cabin in time enough, I think. But who's to

show the Apaches the way to it? Sarah Brunt would have been the one, for Redskins don't generally touch women when they're sober. But I fear they'll start scalping at once when they see men. I guess the only way will be for all but one—myself—to hide down in that cellar. They'll never find the place out, for the only opening to it, besides the trap-door, is the window under the porch. I could be sweet with them, give the Chief some of the champagne, and then lead the whole crowd across the creek to that whisky. The sheep are in the corral, so that the brutes 'll be able to get a good feed, and there's plenty of wood on the pile for them to cook with. If only we can keep 'em busy till the boys turn up! What do you think of my notion?"

"Capital," I replied. "But I shall receive the Indians with you. You're not going on such a risky business alone."

He shook his head.

"No one must show his nose above the cellar but me. It'll be a chance even then.

If there were two of us, it would be fatal. You don't know the Apache on the war-path."

"But didn't you say that they would not touch a woman?" said Nep quickly.

"Yes. But Sarah's five miles away. We can't try that."

"I think so," was the decided answer. "If Sarah could do it, I am sure I can. I have seen Indians before and spoken to them, often."

Mike started and looked at her admiringly.

"What! Would you face Apaches, Miss Gillespie? I never thought of it. Do you know the sort of men they are?"

"Yes; or at least I've heard, which is much the same thing. Anyway, I am not afraid to try, if you think I could do it. I am sure I should be in far less danger than you would, until they've had their whisky, and then we shall be together, shall we not?"

"Yes. We must get out of that cellar as soon as they are over the creek, and

blockade the ranche ; for if the boys should be a bit late, we ought to have something between us and drunken Apaches. Well, Miss Nep, if you are not afraid, I certainly believe that you can do what is wanted safely. But you must be sure of your nerve. If there's the least danger of your losing it, leave the thing in my hands. Now, just think over this matter while I hurry up the boys, and see that all the arms and ammunition are in the cellar. A scout is on that hill. See him ? ”

His quick eyes detected, long before mine followed the black spot on the hill, an Indian scout lying flat on the ground.

“ They will be upon us, Harry, in less than half an hour, now.”

We went inside. All necessary preparations had been made. The guns, powder canisters, and cartridge boxes were placed in the cellar, and the Mexicans and Kirk Troy had deposited all the whisky in the cabin, afterwards nailing up the window and door securely, by Jake Blundell's orders.

"I thought it would be as well for the skunks not to get at it too soon," he said, in explanation, to Mike Alison.

"That's right," said Mike, looking about him thoughtfully. "Well, I think we've fixed up all we can. Yes, there's nothing more to be done till the brutes are on us. There's only one thing more to settle now. Who's to receive them, and lead them to the whisky? Miss Gillespie offers to do it alone. Will you let her?"

"Certainly not," said Laura, resolutely.

"Let me go with her."

"You?" I cried.

"Do it together," said Mike, quickly. "It is safer for both, Harry. And two women are always better than one; the danger will be so much less."

"But I won't have it!" cried Jack, emerging from the cellar at this moment.

"Then I shall go without your leave," said Nep. "Why, Jack, you are not going to begin now to be cowardly about me? We will both go, and we shall be perfectly safe, for we are not afraid; and

if anything happens, you will be close by."

"Can you propose anything else, Temple?" said Mike, quietly. "I am responsible for suggesting the idea. My experience of Indians is that if they meet with no resistance, and only see women, they keep quiet—at least until they've prowled all around, and picked up all they can find to eat and drink. They become troublesome then; but I hope that, before the whisky has gone, the boys will be here. We shall then corral Black Scalp nicely. What say you, Harry? Will you let Miss Temple go?"

I know he will," said Laura, smiling, "if Nep is there."

It was the worst trial that I have ever known. To deliberately allow my darling to go unprotected among these wild, brutal men! I looked at Mike appealingly. "Are you certain that it would not turn out as well if I were to do it?"

"Quite. If they once began, it is not you alone who would be sacrificed, but every living soul. Let her go. At the

slightest scare we can slip up the cellar steps and fight it out."

"Then you may do it," I said, hoarsely. "But mind you do not wander from the house under any pretence whatever. Good God—what a risk!"

Jack sullenly acquiesced in Nep's desire, and the girls prepared for their ordeal. They hastily donned their cloaks, and Nep slipped into the outer pocket of hers a loaded revolver. We men made our way to the cellar, and closed the trap-door above in such a manner that it might be thrown back at a moment's notice. Every man was armed with rifle and revolver except Mr. Chapin, who, after vainly hunting for a weapon suited to his taste, held an axe as if he were afraid of breaking it, and sat on a flour-barrel, very much bewildered, and not a little frightened. Amid all the anxiety of the time I could not help wondering whether, if an attack occurred, Mr. Chapin would smite an Indian with his weapon, or drop it on his own toes.

By Mike's order we took up certain positions in the cellar, so that if a sally were necessary, we should not be in one another's way. At the top of the steps stood Jack, his head touching the trap-door, keeping it open about an inch. A repeating carbine was in his hands, and a knife ready to be placed between his teeth. Thus, at the first alarm he was prepared to rush to the protection of the girls. It was the place of honour, and he would give it up to no one. My place was next to him, and behind me stood Kirk Troy, armed with a double-barrelled shot-gun, which shook strangely, as though the man who held it was trembling for fear. At the window opening under the porch, stood the two best shots of the party, Jake Blundell and Mike, each training a Henry rifle across the space of ground between the house and creek. It was here that Laura and Nep were to meet the Apaches first of all. Mr. Temple and Mr. Gillespie had their places behind Kirk Troy. The former was armed with a gun; the latter

had his revolver and a knife. They were to follow us if we had to leave our hiding-place. The Mexicans were with Mike and Jake, also armed with rifles; ready to join in a fusillade, when the first shot was fired.

Such was the position of the garrison, when the girls, after carefully locking the pantry door, prepared, with pale faces but brave hearts, to receive their unwelcome visitors. Nep was to do the speaking, and take the initiative generally, and Laura was to be the handmaid, and assist in satisfying the requirements of the Apache chief.

The sun had set for nearly half an hour, but the sky being exceedingly clear there was plenty of light outside, though within the cellar it was almost pitch dark. When the girls opened the outer door of the kitchen, they could not help an exclamation of surprise, for covering the broad roll of prairie, at the bottom of which Eagle Tail Creek wound away to the south-east, was a large band of horsemen, approaching the ranche at a gallop. They

were in two divisions, one striking for the herder's cabin, the other for the ranche; but when they saw the girls coming to meet them—for by Mike's advice they went some fifty yards from the house—the Apaches closed their ranks and swept onward, all together, with a long shrill cry.

This was the trying moment. The girls did not know what to expect, as the Indians seemed rather to quicken than slacken speed as they approached, and their whoop had a blood-curdling sound. Laura told me afterwards that she felt an almost irresistible inclination to scream and run away, and would have done so but for her companion. Nep, however, raised her head proudly, and laughed, saying, with flashing eyes, as she noticed Laura's apprehensions:

“My dear, what's the matter? The cowards are only trying to frighten us. Come, let us go forward a few steps, and show them how little we care for their bluster. See, there is the Chief, the great

Black Scalp, himself. He is coming to speak to us. I am so glad. Courage, Laura. Remember that the boys will be here in an hour or two at the most. Courage. Look up and laugh at them."

The Indians were now close at hand; as Nep spoke they drew rein abruptly, and only one man on a graceful bay pony continued to advance at full speed. He pulled up when he came within speaking distance, and then approached at a slow walk, bending forward, and staring intently at the girls between the horse's ears. The Chief was dressed in buckskin, decidedly the worse for wear, and fringed and beaded moccasins. A red comforter tied in a sailor's knot round his neck, and an old battered black hat, such as Mr. Chapin might have worn when new, gave him a semi-civilised air, grotesquely incongruous with the rest of his attire. But his hard, marked features, and the long black single lock which peeped from beneath the clerical hat, prevented any mistake being made as to his identity.

Black Scalp was a tall and rather fine-looking man, with a strong and expressive face, though his mouth was far too large ; the nose inclined to be flat, and his complexion a bright red, the skin puckered and creased in a thousand wrinkles.

In carriage he was erect and dignified, as became his station, and, except when he smiled, his looks were not in the least repulsive.

At this time he was perfectly grave, and inclined his head politely as Nep stepped forward, and addressed him in Mexican—the language in which all conversation between them was carried on.

“Have you come to pay a visit to this ranche, Chief?”

“Si, Senorita.”

“We are alone here, but you are welcome. There is wine and meat for you with us,” pointing to the house, “and in the corral, mutton for the braves ; and fire-water afterwards for all. You will not burn the ranche, Chief?”

Black Scalp looked at her with bright

admiring eyes, and shook his head. The qualities an Indian loves most to see in women are audacity and courage. Here was this white girl, though absolutely in his power, offering her hospitality with a queenly air, as if he were here by invitation. He accepted her terms instantly.

"Ah, si!" he said in answer to her question. "We want food and drink. We will not touch ranchos. But let the *senoritas* cook at once for the Chief and ten amigos, plenty, plenty mutton, and—the Chief is very thirsty, kind *Senorita*!"

He bowed again, with a ghost of a smile about his lips which rather spoilt the effect of his first greeting, and then galloped swiftly towards his men, who were just about to strip the ranche of every portable article it contained, and then set a light to it. At a sharp order from the Chief, however, they slunk back, and the girls walked to the place unmolested, considerably relieved in mind.

But there was an arduous task before them. A meal was to be prepared for

eleven men with the appetites of wolves. There was some danger, also, that the rank and file of the braves might set fire wantonly to the herder's cabin, and the whisky thus be entirely wasted. Black Scalp, however, honestly kept his word; and though the wood-pile was ransacked, and a great part of the stable torn away, to supply the numbers of fires which were soon blazing in every direction, the cabin and the ranche were left alone.

The girls now went vigorously to work. The bachelors' bed-room, where the wedding-breakfast was to have been held, was lighted up, and a meal spread, the like of which I much doubt whether Black Scalp and his friends had ever tasted in their lives. In their eagerness to conciliate their grim visitors, the girls placed all the delicacies before them which Sarah Brunt had prepared for a very different party. There were jellies and custards, pumpkin-pies and wedding-cake, as well as rounds of cold beef and ham; piles of soft, light biscuits, plates of crackers, and a good

substantial cheese. On the kitchen-fire two pans of chops frizzled away, manipulated by Laura, while Nep mixed batter with a rapid hand, and fried hot cakes by the dozen.

A savoury smell it was which floated into the cellar through the crack in the trap door. How our mouths watered, and our souls rebelled, as we thought of the feed these thieving Redskins were about to have at our expense. The only comfort was a thought of the Nemesis which would presently overtake them in the shape of Mike Alison's men. But the hardest trial of all was yet to come. Supper was now ready, and when Nep went to the outer door and beckoned with a smile, eleven tall Indians, making no more sound with their moccasined feet than if they had been a party of ghosts, solemnly marched to the table in single file, seating themselves in perfect silence and decorum. Laura then went into the pantry and brought out two bottles of champagne, at sight of which the guests, who had been looking somewhat

askance at the jellies and custards, as if uncertain what they were good for, brightened up, and gave vent to their feelings in a low guttural chuckle.

Pop went the champagne corks. Nep poured the liquor out in tumblers, and Laura handed it round. The Indians now began in good earnest. This uncorking of the champagne was the last bitter drop to the listening folk in the cellar, and more than one member of the party relieved himself by heartfelt, though whispered, swears.

It was not long before the Indians finished their meal. They were hungry, their teeth were good, and they wanted to get to the whisky. But they enjoyed the champagne, and drank bottle after bottle. And now Nep committed a blunder which well-nigh proved fatal to all of us. Instead of refusing to bring out more than half of the twelve bottles lying in the pantry, she opened all. Consequently by the time the Indians had satisfied their hunger and thirst, they were decidedly

heated with wine, and therefore dangerous. The party was now less silent than it had been. The men began to use their tongues more than their teeth, and eye the girls with bright and sinister glances. At last the Chief rose, and made his way softly to the kitchen, followed by the braves, no longer in decorous single file. The girls were busy at the stove at this moment, and did not notice the movement of their visitors until they were close at hand; the Chief was at Laura's side when she looked up, smiling at her, and behind were ten pairs of eyes, all fixed upon her face, gleaming rows of teeth below. The sight was so horrible and unexpected, that she started violently, with a nervous cry, which if a little louder, would have sealed the fate of those Apaches, and ultimately of our own; it was only enough, however, to make Jack prick up his ears, and raise the trap-door another inch. The danger was most imminent, for, as Laura moved, the Chief laid his hand upon her wrist, and his smile broadened from ear to ear.

But before his fingers had time to close, the end of a pistol muzzle was thrust between his teeth with so much force that he reeled, let the girl go, and catching his foot in a frying pan, stumbled awkwardly back against the wall. His assailant was Nep Gillespie, who now stood between the Indian and Laura with angry eyes and closely set lips.

"What," she exclaimed scornfully, "is this Black Scalp's gratitude for good food and wine? When I asked him to sup in my house, I thought he was a great Chief, but I was wrong. He is but a drunken dog. Touch 'la Senorita' and I will kill you as I have done many a braver man. Mio amigos"—addressing the rest in clear, authoritative tones—the men standing at a respectful distance, grave and sober, "will you taste my fire-water? Yes? Then come with me, for it is in the little ranche. And do you"—again speaking to the Chief, and stamping her foot—"go first, drunken wolf!"

They looked at each other steadily, the

fragile girl, and the tall, strong man, who was celebrated, even among grim Western settlers, for courage and power of will. There was a dull savage glare in his eyes now, yet the smile had not quite left his face, causing it to wear an expression positively fiendish. Black Scalp had not owned the control of any human being since the death of his father, the old Chief, when he was quite a lad. As for the revolver, it was but a paltry plaything in his eyes, yet he was quelled. Perhaps he heard the stern demurring hum which came with an ominous unanimity from his braves ; perhaps the steady eyes and clear sweet voice could do what it would have been useless for force to attempt ; be this as it may, with every evil passion awake in his heart, the man obeyed, and passed out of the ranche, followed by his men. Nep came last, and closed the door, then took the lead, and went quickly across the meadow to the creek, up the hill beyond, and so to the herder's cabin. By this time the number of her followers had

increased to many a score ; and upwards of a hundred stood round the girl as she pointed to the cabin and said in a voice they could all hear and understand :

“Here is the fire-water, amigos, six great barrels. You are very welcome to it. But do not seek for more. Be content with food and drink and leave the ranche in peace. If you do not, I say that not one of you will ever see your homes again. The White men know that you are here. So be careful. Oh, be careful what you do !”

And then she went away, all standing respectfully aside to let her pass.

When Nep reached the ranche, she found Laura still near the stove, pale and silent, nervously watching six Indians, who had made their way into the kitchen, and were poking inquisitively about, examining the handles of drawers, peeping into the pantry, and helping themselves to scraps of the feast. At intervals they cast sidelong glances at the girl of no pleasant nature, but they made no attempt to molest her.

The moment Nep saw the uninvited guests she drew her revolver again, and sharply inquired their business. At first they made no answer ; but at last one man explained that they were there by order of the Chief to watch the ranche.

This was very awkward, for the place could not be blockaded while they were about. Presently a happy thought occurred to Nep.

"Laura," she said in English, "go to the medicine chest, and bring me the laudanum bottle, we must send these little dears to sleep."

There were six bottles of brandy in the pantry untouched. It did not take Nep long to make a judicious mixture privately, and then blandly produce a full, well-corked brandy bottle to the communicative Indian. But alas ! he would not touch it ; there were evidently strict orders abroad on this point. The girls looked at each other in despair ; but while racking their brains to devise another plan, they became aware of a curious circumstance.

All the Indians had left the room but one, and this man came softly up to Nep and tapped the bottle, which she still held, in a significant manner. It was delivered into his hands at once, upon which he drew the cork with his teeth and took several hearty pulls. When he had drunk his fill he went out, one of his companions presently appearing in his place, to go through the same performance. This happened six times, until each of the Apaches had swallowed enough medicated spirit to give him his quietus, had he been anything but an Indian. In this way the scruples of conscience of the watchers, and their love for alcohol, were satisfied at one and the same time. No white man knows the intricacies of Apache military discipline, and we can only conjecture that if these men had been court-martialled for this offence—which, for reasons that will presently appear, they were not—they would have been acquitted on a plea of “no evidence.”

However this might be, in fifteen

minutes the watchers were as fast as rocks, the outer doors of the ranche were closed, Nep gave a gentle signal, and one by one the little garrison of ten crept from their harbour of refuge to hold a council of war.

The work of the women was over, it was now the turn of the men.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PAYMENT OF THE DEBT

MIKE ALISON was the last to mount the cellar steps. As he reached the parlour floor he gave his orders right and left.

“This place must be closed, boys, smartly. Jack, fix those patent shutters of yours. Harry, bar the doors. Miss Gillespie, put out that light for the present; they must not have a glimpse of what is going on. Jake, get the parson, Mr. Temple, and Kirk to help you with the heavy furniture for blocking the windows. José and Miguel, go into the cellar with that lamp on the bracket, light it when you are in the place, and leave it in a safe spot, then bring up the arms and ammunition, and place them on the table. Mr. Gillespie, take up your rifle, and keep a

sharp eye round the kitchen and bed-room for spies, while I do the same elsewhere. Be spry as you can, friends. The sooner we're snug the better."

We were busy as bees in less than a minute, obeying Mike Alison implicitly. I do not think there was any order which he could have given that would have been questioned; and the first to follow his instructions were Jake Blundell and Jack, thus acknowledging in the most practical way how much they felt they had wronged him.

Half an hour later Eagle Tail Rancho was as secure from outside attack as the ingenuity of man could make it. Every window was secured with a closely-fitting shutter, strengthened further by furniture—a table against one, a chest of drawers against another, and so on. The doors were bolted simply, being too heavy and solid in themselves to require other support; and the one other aperture which it was necessary to stop, the chimney of the parlour fire—a space wide enough for two

Indians to slip down together—was effectually plugged by rolling up two mattresses, and tightly jamming them into the cavity with the sides of Mr. Temple's beds—two stout deal planks.

There was no interruption to the work. The Apaches had all migrated to the other side of the creek, and were having a high old time with the whisky. It was only to be hoped that they would not leave the gate of the corral open, and let out all the sheep. On the porch the six watchers snored peacefully, little dreaming of what was going on near them.

The blockade being completed, a halt was called, and the exhausted garrison regaled themselves with what the guests of the evening had been pleased to leave behind them. Happily, the stores were not completely used up, and for liquor there was plenty of brandy and water, though, alas! all our champagne was gone.

We now began to recover our spirits, and, as we munched away by the light of

our kerosene lamp, to speculate coolly on the disgust of the Apaches when they should return from their carousal and find out what had happened. Mike Alison, alone, sat apart, silent and thoughtful. In the presence of immediate danger his manner had been cheerful, almost to jocoseness, the risk and emergency seeming to act upon his spirits like a glass of wine. But this over, he became again grim and taciturn, though his face never at any time expressed the least fear or anxiety. His silence made us nervous, however, and it was not long before Nep asked him point-blank what it was he feared.

"Nothing," he replied curtly, "if the whisky lasts out. Everything, if it don't. Eat your supper now, and leave it all to me. I have my plans ready, if there should be trouble; but it all depends on the boys."

No more was to be got out of him than this.

How much truth there is in the old

saying about ignorance. The boldest tiger-hunter in India is the "griffin" who has just arrived from England. The most unconcerned person on board a ship I sailed in once, when the jib-boom had gone by the board, and a squall had nearly laid us on our beam-ends, was a lad of fifteen, who was on his first voyage. "What fun!" I heard him say to the captain, who clung to the taffrail, white as death. "This is something like a storm, now!"

Laura, it is true, was very pale and silent, and sat with her hand in mine, eating nothing. Her spirit was high; but thought of the look and the touch of the Apache Chief made her tremble. Nep, on the contrary, seemed to be in the liveliest spirits, and made fun by pretending to condole with Mr. Chapin upon the loss of the champagne in the wickedest manner. I felt strangely light-hearted, also, in spite of our anxieties, and a burning desire just to have five minutes—or less would do—with Black Scalp in a quiet place all by myself. For one thing, my instinctive

confidence in Mike Alison had been justified to the fullest extent; though why he should have felt it to be his special duty to take all the trouble—nay, to spend all his money—for the protection of our settlement, I could not understand. I was to learn soon.

The grave members of the garrison besides Mike, were the Sheriff, Jack, and the Mexicans. Jake, indeed, was as silent as our leader, though more at his ease, and applied himself to the cold ham and brandy with immense gusto. In the midst of it, however, he suddenly slapped his leg with an emphatic, though whispered oath.

“Well I’m doggoned if we haven’t missed one thing.”

“What’s that?” questioned Jack, anxiously.

“Why, we’ve blocked up every crack and cranny in the place. Now, how the deuce are we goin’ to plug them cusses when they come from the whisky? They’ll hammer the place down, and not

git a scratch all the way through. Mike, how's that?"

"All right," was the quiet answer.

"I don't sabe. Mike, I don't sabe."

"No? I thought you knew the Redskins' ways, Jake. If they smell out a man, this place will be on fire in two minutes; but if they think, as they do now, that there are only a couple of girls, they won't mind working at the windows quietly for a good spell. At least that's my idea."

Jake nodded.

"By George! that's so, boss. But look here, when they once dew git through, we can't hold the fort long."

"I know it. But we can make a very decent barricade with the bedsteads, chairs, and mattresses which are left, and give them a warm bath before they get to us. I reckon, by that time, to have the boys here, if Juan has ever got to the cañon at all."

There was a suppressed bitterness in his tone as he spoke, which struck me unpleasantly.

"Do you think they ought to be here now, Mike, if the boy had ridden straight?"

"We'cl," he said slowly, as if he did not relish the question, "I would not wish to go so far as that; but it's a fact that the very second the boys know what has happened, they'll be on the way at a lively pace, and he's been gone a fair while. Hist! now, I hear a snake on the porch!"—he dropped his voice to a whisper—"The fun will soon begin. Clear away this ruck," pointing to the food; "that barricade must go up at once, in case of accidents. Ah, there's the first blow."

As he spoke there came a dull heavy thud; some Redskin returning from the carousal, had struck the kitchen door with his tomahawk. No more appetite for supper now. We sprang up and obeyed Mike's injunction with feverish haste. By his order, we took off our shoes and stepped about as lightly as possible, no one speaking above his breath. Our ears were naturally very much open, under these circum-

stances, and we presently became aware that the place was surrounded by the enemy. Ghostly knocks sounded at the doors, some soft, some heavy. The voice of Black Scalp, decidedly thick in utterance, was audible more than once, asking "la senorita" to admit him, "to say good-bye." Then crack went the glass of the parlour window, and we could hear the Chief vainly wrenching at the shutter with his knife. Now came a rustle and a scramble on the roof. Some enterprising individual was trying to make his way through, but soon desisted, finding the earth hard as baked brick.

It may easily be imagined the way in which these symptoms of activity outside affected our nerves. Happily, we had not much time to think. Every one was hard at work conveying all the furniture in the place to the parlour. Here, Jake Blundell, the Mexicans, and Mr. Gillespie were skilfully constructing a barricade in front of the door of the girls' room. In the centre they placed the piano, flanking it

with the bedsteads, the whole filled in with chairs and odds and ends, so arranged that the attacking party would have to pull it asunder piece by piece before they could reach those behind; and in all parts were cunning loopholes, through which the repeating rifles would do terrible execution.

The position of the barrier was chosen because, as you will see by the plan, the girls' room had only one small window, and no outer doors, so would make a good sanctuary, should the boys be late in arriving on the scene.

By the time our work was done, the guns and ammunition placed in convenient position, the siege began in good earnest.

Shrill cries of drunken braves were heard on all sides, growing louder and more menacing as the news of the blockade spread abroad. Now and then there was the vicious whirr and thud of a rifle bullet, men firing recklessly at both doors and windows; and, through all, gradually increasing in volume, came the

steady thunder of blows upon the parlour window and the kitchen door, the places which seemed specially chosen for attack.

In five minutes from the time the first shot was fired we were all behind our barrier, Mike Alison, alone, slowly pacing through the empty rooms. He held a revolver in either hand, and was ready with a warm welcome for the Redskin unlucky enough to be the first to force the blockade. Before he took up this position, however, he had carefully placed us behind the barricade. In the first rank, kneeling and training their carbines between chair legs were the Mexicans, good shots both, quick hands with the knife at close quarters, and fierce and active as wild cats. Close behind, stooping so that only our eyes appeared above the barrier, were Jake Blundell, Jack, Mr. Gillespie, and myself. The two first were armed with rifles; Mr. Gillespie with a double-barrelled shot gun heavily charged with buck-shot, a weapon like a small cannon in cool hands; and I handling a revolver,

to which I was most accustomed, carrying a ball larger than the bullet of a Winchester carbine, and with a rifled barrel ten inches in length. I was in the open doorway, and behind me Kirk Troy should have been standing with the Henry rifle he could use so well.

Alas ! Kirk had to be left entirely out of our calculations now. He could no longer be counted on as an able-bodied member of the garrison. From the beginning he had been in a very perturbed state of mind, and this grew steadily until, when we reached the upper regions, after the watchers were successfully drugged, he could scarcely stand. The quietness of the place had soothed his nerves for a time, and he worked well in the blockade ; but from the moment when the first Apache whoop was heard, he had dropped his gun with a frightened whimper and slunk away to the farthest corner of the room, as scared and nerveless as a little child.

In vain did Jake Blundell address him in rough, forcible language ; in vain were

Laura's attempts to soothe his fears and persuade him to help her in the work of handing ammunition to the garrison. He would do nothing but sit like a frightened rabbit, turning and twisting his great hands, his thin face white as death, his lips twitching convulsively, his breath coming in short gasps, and his eyes almost starting from their sockets in unreasoning, helpless terror.

The poor creature could not even say what he feared; but it was evident that his brain was completely turned. He was now at last, in very truth, a poor, useless, gibbering idiot. So we turned our backs upon him and settled to our work.

The other man in the party still unarmed was the Rev. Jonathan Chapin, who had ceased to have any confidence in his axe. At this moment he was of little more use than the idiot, though he tried with all his might to conceal his feelings. It would have been cruelty, however, to force the poor fellow into action; so he was set behind to tear open cartridge-

boxes, measure powder and shot into right quantities, and place them ready for use, under the direction of Nep Gillespie.

Side by side with me in the doorway stood Mr. Temple, with another shot-gun. He smiled as he grasped his weapon, and said cheerily :

"I'm rather stiff for burning powder, lad, and my eyes are not as good as they were ; but I've knocked over a few pheasants in my time, and I believe I can bag a bird or two yet. I'll try, at any rate."

"We'll hope that it won't be necessary, sir," I answered. But I felt little doubt about the matter, for, as I spoke, the blows upon the kitchen door were coming with such force that the whole place quivered and shook, and the entrance of the Apaches could only be the question of a few minutes. I could see that Mike thought the same, for he held up his hand at the moment, as if to prepare us for an attack, and then stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the bachelors' bedroom, with raised revolvers, waiting.

The lamp in the parlour, and another where the girls were sorting cartridges, were the only lights now burning. They were to be left untouched, for they would be of more advantage to us than to the Indians, as few of them would be armed with rifles. Civilised weapons are discarded when their brains become fired with whisky; it is then principally a question of knife and tomahawk.

We waited now in silence. Our orders were distinct and unmistakable. The signal of the break of the blockade would be reports from Mike's pistols, as he picked off the foremost Apaches. He would then make for the barrier, the Mexicans covering his retreat. If their efforts did not effectually check the first onslaught, Jack and the Sheriff were to join in, and should a Redskin actually reach the barrier, Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Temple, and myself were to conclude the business.

There was a sudden lull in the hostilities. The hearts of some of us grew lighter for an instant; perhaps the boys were here.

No. For now, long, loud and shrill came the Apache whoop, and a storm of blows ten times harder than before rained upon both door and window.

A prodigious crash, and a howl. The door had given way somewhat quicker than had been anticipated, and three Indians went sprawling full length on the kitchen floor. Now came four quick reports from Mike's revolvers, two at a time. Oh, the yell which followed! Never were honest Red men so shamefully deceived! No pale trembling white girls to pray for mercy from men who knew not the meaning of the word. But in their place, with the bright moonlight which now poured through the doorway full upon him, stood a tall man, his eyes shining as green as a tiger's, his hands holding pistols which struck down four of their number before they had crossed the threshold. The first rank of Indians at the kitchen door were Nep's ten guests.

Before the Apaches had recovered sufficiently from the shock of surprise felt at

this reception, Mike retreated to the next room, turning at the parlour door to fire once more. It was his last volley, however, for now the window, not far from where he stood, gave way before the furious attack ; the table which had been blocked behind the shutter tottered and fell, and a flood of moonlight swept into the room.

Mike was now within the barrier. As he sprang over the side, the Mexicans opened fire at the door, and Jack and the Sheriff at the window, for we were now attacked from those two points simultaneously. The rest reserved their fire for closer quarters.

"Steady, boys," shouted Mike, in tones so sharp and clear that his words were audible above the yells of Apaches and the crack of the repeaters. "Not too fast, mark your men before you let go. Make every shot tell. Don't fire, you two," addressing Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple, who were getting excited, "until the devils are close at hand.~ Harry, keep back, you must form the reserve with me. Now,

Miss Nep, round the corner with you, away from this open door. Mr. Chapin, come here. Ah, your nerves are steadier, are they? Hand the cartridges to the boys, don't let those girls take the risk. Curse that idiot! I thought he'd have found spunk at such a pinch as this. My God, where are those boys?"

It was now upwards of three hours since Juan started on his errand, and we had expected help in little over two. The only explanation we could think of was that the boy had lost his way. Like all Mexicans he was a good rider, and Leone was the surest-footed and fastest pony in the country.

The struggle could only last a few minutes. Though the continued fire of the Mexicans, Jake and Jack, mowed the enemy down as they made their first charge, and drove them back in disorder, we could see, from the lines of dark faces outside the windows, that their numbers were overwhelming, and every moment we expected to hear the crackle of blazing wood, and to find that the house

was on fire. For some unknown reason, however, this common expedient of the Indian was not put in force on this occasion, the Apaches concentrating all their energies in crushing us by main force.

Now another yell, bad enough to hear on the prairie, and ear-piercing beyond all description inside a house, warned us that the second attack was coming; and pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat came the soft rush of fifty pairs of moccasined feet over the board floor. Then the frail barrier shook and swayed under the grasp of many hands.

"Fire, every one!" yelled Mike, picking off two men who had climbed the piano, and were about to spring into the midst of us. We all obeyed with a will, and six Indians fell back, with cries more piercing than their yell. But the same moment part of the barrier gave way altogether, and a swarm of Apaches sprang at the opening. But Jake Blundell's great form was in the way, and, wielding a clubbed rifle as if it were a walking-stick, he rained such a torrent of blows upon the enemy

nearest at hand that they tumbled back right and left in confusion; while behind, short, sharp, and quick as the bark of a terrier, came the reports of Jack's repeater; and the Mexicans, crouching with bare knives, stabbed every man they could reach who had a hand upon the barrier. Yet still the Indians pressed on, those behind treading down their wounded comrades mercilessly, and facing the deadly fire of the White men with the courage born of deep potations of fire-water and their own wild nature. Now Miguel fell forward with a groan, shot by some marksman outside the window. At the sound Mike raised his right hand, his pistol-bullet sped, and this Indian, when just about to pick off the Sheriff, dropped his rifle, and troubled us no more.

Another sharp order: "Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Temple, get inside and reload. Make room for Harry and me."

We dragged them back, for neither heard the words. And then Mike and I stood in the doorway, shoulder to

shoulder, seconding, as best we might, the efforts of the gallant three in the van.

Jake Blundell was down at last. He had stepped too far from the barrier in the excitement of defending the breach, had been surrounded, and, in fighting his way back, received a blow on the head from a tomahawk which knocked him insensible. A rush was made for his scalp, as he was a well known man; but Mike saw the intention in time. With a sharp cry, he sprang forward, struck down one Indian with the butt-end of his revolver, snatched up the tomahawk which was dropped, and, with a swiftness and fury literally demoniacal, cleared the ground of Apaches for two yards and more, and, seizing Jake in his arms, dragged him inside the barricade, turning again with the quickness of light to charge upon those who followed.

It was a remarkable feat of strength and fully justified a comment made by Jake himself the night before, except that Mike seemed possessed by fifty devils instead of one. In this instance he both

saved Jake's life and foiled the Apaches' second charge, thereby giving us time to breathe. Indians never keep up a steady, continuous struggle; their warfare is a series of furious attacks, between which intervals of several minutes often occur.

We looked at one another with haggard faces. Miguel was dead; Jake apparently so; Jack had a nasty knife wound in the leg which prevented him from standing, and José was spitting blood and so much exhausted that I had to carry him into the inner room, as soon as it was safe to move. The only able-bodied men were myself, Mike Alison, Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Temple, and Mr. Chapin. There was one drop of comfort for us. Our parson was no longer trembling with nervous fear. His face was still pale, but it was firm and hard set; and when we had borne Jake into a place of safety in the girls' room, he grasped Mike's arm, saying quickly, "What shall I do? I cannot shoot, though I am willing to try; tell me what is best."

"You will fight?"

"I should not be fit to live, if I did not—now."

"You're right. Take that axe, then. Is it too heavy? No? Then hold it firmly and use it like a man."

"I understand," was the reply.

Mike smiled; he was now quite his old cool self again, and the contrast between Mr. Chapin's previous sanctimoniousness, with his present warlike attitude and speech, struck his sense of humour keenly. As we hurriedly bore remnants of the barricade into the bed-room, he said to me:

"Parson or no parson, the good old Yankee blood comes out now; they have true grit in them—these New England folk, in spite of their long faces. The Southerners found that out in the war. I'll trust him now. What do you want, Miss Gillespie?" The girl had touched him on the shoulder; she had a rifle in her hand.

"Where shall I stand?" she said briefly.

"Jack is wounded, and it is my turn."

"In that further corner," he answered in the same tone. We'll receive them there," adding, in a grim whisper to me, "for the last time, lad. If the boys are not here in ten minutes, they may stay away altogether."

The base of operations was now changed to the north-eastern corner of the girls' bed-room. Here Jake, the Mexican, and my partner were placed with Laura, who was striving to nurse all three at once. Nep stood over Jack, who could still use a rifle, and before them were Mr. Temple and Mr. Gillespie. Mike, Mr. Chapin, and myself now hastily erected a rough barricade before the group with the bedsteads, the arm-chair and a mattress. Over this the men trained their arms, as best they might. By Mike's order, Mr. Chapin also stood with them, and before the barrier, with a revolver in one hand, and a tomahawk in the other, Mike and I stood to receive the Apaches' charge. We paid no attention to the idiot. He was still crouched in the corner opposite, silent, with

livid, ghastly face, his teeth clenched, and a slight froth about his lips, his eyes fixed with glassy, vacant stare upon the door.

There was a stir in the other room. The enemy were creeping on. I felt hot breath upon my cheek.

"Good-bye, lad," Mike whispered between his set teeth, his eyes upon the doorway, "we may meet somewhere again, who knows? Here they come. Steady, all!"

Again the cruel yell; this time with a triumphant ring, as they saw how few were left. The repeating rifles rang out, and Mike and I emptied our revolvers three times. Then they were upon us, and it was hand to hand. But we were strong and desperate men, fighting for more than life, and for the first minute, fast as they came, they were shot and struck down. Every drop of blood in my body boiled and sang; every muscle stood out like a band of steel. I was severely hacked more than once, and received many a wound; but I felt no pain. The only thought in my mind was how to prevent the Apaches

from reaching the group behind the barricade. And back to back with me, felling two men for my one, was Mike Alison. Twice, when a knife was at my throat, and an Indian's hand in my hair, Mike dealt him a deadly blow. His eyes seemed upon me always, and that I ever lived at all through that time is owing solely to him.

But this could not last. In spite of any struggle we could make, though the parson's axe behind us cracked many a skull, and Mr. Temple, Mr. Gillespie, Jack, and Nep, poured an unceasing fire upon the enemy, we were pressed slowly but surely, back, nearer and nearer to the corner where Laura knelt over the wounded men.

A sickening helplessness began to creep over me as I saw the dense crowd of fierce faces in front, and felt the yielding barrier behind. The struggle was hopeless. I tried desperately to shake off the feeling; but at this moment something struck heavily against me, and I found Mike's face, pale and ghastly, resting on my

shoulder. He was severely wounded ; yet I had little time to think of him. There had been a slight lull in hostilities the minute before, for no Apache lived who came within reach of Mike's arm. But they rallied as he fell, and we were swept over the barrier in a moment and pinned fast against the wall. I could not move. Part of the barricade had fallen upon me, and I was absolutely powerless. The rush of Indians was now past us towards the corner itself, where Laura now stood unprotected, and foremost of all sprang a tall Indian, wearing the unmistakable lock of dark hair. There was nothing apparently to stop Black Scalp's course, for the other men were held prisoners like myself by the débris of the barricade, and Mr. Chapin, the only one on his feet, was guarding Nep.

We were lost ; we were lost indeed !

But then—then—a most wonderful thing happened.

High above the Indians' cry of triumph at Mike's fall—there was heard a most

awful and extraordinary sound ; the yelling laugh of a maniac.

When the Apaches closed in upon us, Kirk Troy rose from his corner, his face horribly, frightfully distorted, his gibbering idiotcy changed to frenzied madness. He no longer trembled. His great powerful frame was nerved for action ; he held out long arms bared, with muscles like strong ropes ; his eyes gleaming in the strange light of the one lamp which had not been overturned and the white moonlight. He stepped forward with swift and steady stride, pushing back the Indians as if they were so many children. As he advanced he laughed aloud—a screeching laugh—and he made straight for the Chief. He was close upon him when Black Scalp sprang forward with the leap of a leopard, and with upraised knife.

Kirk caught the hand that held the knife with his left, and with his right seized the Chief by the long black lock of hair. Then he laughed again. The struggle did not last a moment. He jerked back the Apache's head so violently that his neck must have

been dislocated; and then, letting go the lock of hair, he clutched his throat.

We all looked on without moving, and before the rest had time to recover from their amazement, Black Scalp's soul had passed to the happy hunting grounds. Then Kirk Troy hurled the dead body of their Chief among the savages, and followed, whirling his bony arms and striking with Black Scalp's knife. He was in the midst of them fighting as only a madman can, with the strength of insanity.

Indians have a superstitious reverence for madness, and wavered from the moment that Kirk Troy appeared; when their Chief was killed, they gave way right and left, though a few stood bravely out, and the panic once begun, rapidly increased, until the Indians were tearing, hustling, and struggling to get out of the door, faster than they had entered it. In three minutes the room was clear, in another minute there was not a single living Apache in the place. Then back, with staggering step, came poor Kirk Troy. As he crossed the threshold, we

could see that he was bleeding profusely, his hand pressed against his side. He was silent, and I cannot help thinking that in some dim way his senses had returned to him. But this we shall never know, for he had not taken more than two steps into the room before he reeled, and fell. He never rose again.

And what now? In a minute or so the Indians would recover themselves, and then——

No! for there came a steady rumbling sound which made the ground tremble, and our hearts leap up in thankfulness—the thunder of a hundred horses' feet. The boys had come.

Crack! The reports of a hundred rifles rang out like a roll of cannon. A minute later and the place was full of cowboys, while unceasingly outside crashed the repeaters; now far, now near. The revenge party never slept that night; neither did they draw rein nor taste bite or sup all the following day; not a single one of Black Scalp's braves ever reached the reservations.

Nep's prophecy was faithfully fulfilled.

An hour had passed since we heard the tramp of the boys and knew that we were safe. Our first care was for the wounded men, and, assisted by a number of the boys, we did our best to ease their pain, and discover the extent of their hurts. Among Mike's men was one whom they called Zeph, who had been surgeon's assistant in the Civil War; he it was who examined the wounded—we listened breathlessly to his opinion. Jack's wound, he said, was a mere scratch: Jake, who had now regained consciousness, would soon be right if he were only kept quiet; José, he shook his head over, though saying he would do his best; but, when he came to Mike, he said, quietly:

"He will live about half an hour, a few minutes less or more—no longer. You'd better hev him quiet to yourself awhile, for I kin see he wants to speak to ye. Prop him up, so. Now get some brandy. That's all I can do for him."

Mike had now come fully to himself, and was listening with a smile to these

candid remarks. I could not speak, but beckoned to Laura, who was attending at the moment to the Sheriff. She brought the brandy and gave it to Mike. Then she knelt down beside the dying man in silence, waiting for him to speak.

"No," he replied, though she had said nothing, "I am in no pain, Laura—no pain. But I cannot move—I suppose it is the loss of blood."

Presently he began to talk clearly and well, though in a low voice.

"I have more than one thing to say and I must be quick about it, as Zeph said. So the boys came in time. Did Juan lose his way? Ah, I thought so. I knew they would not be two hours in riding here. A little more brandy, Laura. So—so—and you never guessed—you never remembered me. Why, I knew you from the first, though you were but a little thing when I saw you last. I knew you partly because you are so like Adelaide—Adelaide"—he repeated this name as if he loved it. "Well, I did not mean you to find it out, and if I had lived you

would not. Laura," he paused here for a moment, and then spoke very slowly, "you are so very like your sister Adelaide, so very like Adelaide—when I knew her, and when I loved her."

We both started.

"Do you recognise me now?"

Laura shook her head with a bewildered look.

"No. You were a very little girl—and I am altered—Heaven knows that—altered out of all recognition. Well, then, I am Harold Courtney."

Laura looked intently at the haggard face.

"Oh, yes! I see it now," she cried excitedly. "I remember you. When I was a child you often came to see us. You were at Oxford with Tom Copley—Adelaide's husband."

"Yes—and something more than that—but you were very young and didn't know."

"Something more? Oh! Mike—Harold—that we should owe our lives—once—twice to you! Oh! if Adelaide knew!"

He raised his head and spoke fiercely

between clenched teeth: "I loved Adelaide, Laura. I loved her before he ever saw her. Why, it was I who introduced him to her first of all. I tell you she should have been my wife." A fit of coughing now came on, and choked him. In a little while he continued quietly:

"We won't say more about it now. It was the old story. I cared for her a long, long while, and I thought she was beginning to return it. Then I spoke, and found that it was too late; she was already privately engaged to—to Tom. Well, I left England before I did any harm, that is all I can say for myself. I've been what you have heard since. But there's one thing I want you to know—I want you to tell her, Laura. What I've done for you was partly for her sake—not all, for I owed a debt to Harry—but you were like her. I could not let you be in any danger—for her sake—so I spent my money—hoping that the Apaches would hear of the boys, and leave the settlement alone. And now, there's one thing more Harry, I said last night that I'd stay to

see you married. Will you let me? Will you be married now, so that I may feel quite sure that all is right and safe before I die?"

I stooped and kissed him. I might live a hundred years, but I should never have again such a true and loving friend. Then I looked at Laura, and she rose to speak to Mr. Chapin.

The parson came forward readily; he was bruised and sore, but otherwise little the worse for the fight, though his white tie had been torn from his neck, his black coat was in tatters, and his long, pale face plentifully streaked with blood.

While a few preparations were being made, Mike lay still with closed eyes. But he opened them suddenly, hearing his name pronounced. Jake Blundell was speaking to Mr. Gillespie.

"Tell Mike," he was saying feebly, being very weak and ill, "that before he's clear off the hooks, I'd like to know that he bears no ill-feelin'. I misjudged him very bad. If I were not so sick I'd go to him. Do it for me, will ye?"

Mr. Gillespie crossed over to the dying man.

"Can't you bring him near?" he said faintly, "where I can see him. Then I'll answer him myself."

They moved the Sheriff, and the two men lay side by side. With great difficulty Mike stretched out his hand and laid it upon that of his old enemy. Jake held it close.

"Can ye forgive me, Mike?" he whispered. "As I said a'ready, I were misled, misled from beginnin' to end."

And the other smiled upon him, and tried to return the pressure.

"It's—all right—all right, Jake. You did your best."

His voice was very faint now, though his eyes were bright and clear.

And then the wedding-service was concluded.

Was there ever a stranger, wilder wedding?

A cowboy held the only lamp—the kerosene lamp—that had survived the fight. All around us lay the bodies of the

dead and wounded. Here lay José, dying fast; here lay the long limbs of Kirk Troy, stiffened in death; here Jack sat, his leg bandaged; here was Miguel, dead; here the corpse of Black Scalp. The light of the lamp fell upon these witnesses of the marriage. It fell upon the grey eyes and pale face of Mike, who had saved us; it fell upon Nep, her face no longer smiling, but soft and tearful; and fell upon the bride—her dress torn and stained with blood. And it fell upon the bridegroom—what a bridegroom! My coat hung in strips; my shirt was torn off my arms; a great gash on the left hand gave me only two fingers to hold the ring; and my face was black with powder, and streaked with blood. For spectators we had besides half a dozen of Mike's cowboys, their wild faces wearing an expression of unwonted softness, and their voices answering with a deep "Amen" the simple prayer with which the clergyman concluded the service.

Mike was lying quite still now, a peaceful smile on his face, his hand in Jake Blundell's, his eyes upon Laura.

"Thanks, old lad," he said faintly. "Laura, will you kiss me?" She did so with a sob. "Now, Harry." As my lips touched his, he murmured softly: "Lad, I've paid my debt at last."

"Oh, Mike!" I cried bitterly. "There must be some hope. You will not die now, after all! I cannot bear it!"

"Hush, Harry. It's—right. I do not wish to live. If I lived I should only be worse than ever perhaps. I want you to be happy, and you will—you and Laura," his voice had fallen to a whisper, his eyes were getting dim. "Good-bye—dear lad—Laura—you'll—tell—Adelaide."

This was his last word. Slowly the light died out of the big, grey eyes; almost imperceptibly the breathing stopped; his head fell back. Mike Alison was dead.